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Cabeza de Vaca Among the Lamanites

Author(s): Conrey Bryson

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Abstract: The article relates the story of Cabeza de Vaca, a European who traversed across what is now Texas in the fall of 1537, and mingled among the Indians and found their traditions and beliefs closely related to Christianity.

CABEZA DE VACA....

Among the Lamanites

ONE of the undeniable external evidences of the truth of the Book of Mormon is the almost general belief, among the Indians of the Americas, in a fair God who had visited them in the past and promised to return. B. H. Roberts' comprehensive *New Witnesses for God* is replete with evidence of such belief.

There is one page from history, however, which seems to have been inadequately treated in our literature on the descendants of Lehi's people. It is the story of Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, the first European to traverse the territory now comprising the state of Texas. Cabeza de Vaca's story not only serves further to establish that the red man believed in a fair God, but offers a beautiful story of a simple faith that grew in the heart of the Spanish wanderer.

It was in the early autumn of 1537 that Cabeza de Vaca and three followers, two Spaniards and a Negro, began a long westward journey on foot through what is now Texas. These four were all that remained of the proud Spanish company of Panfilo Narvaez which had landed ten years earlier on the coast of Florida. The others of that haughty company of four hundred had fallen victims to a series of incomparable misfortunes. Hurricanes had first destroyed two of their ships and many of their horses. Next, in their fevered search for gold, they marched inland and were unable to find their remaining ships. Starvation and disease, too, had taken their toll from the company that had carried the cross in one hand and the sword in the other.

But while misfortune was bringing about humility, utter dependence upon nature and nature's God was developing an abiding faith among some members of the fast diminishing company. While the last of the horses were being prepared for food, once haughty Spaniards knelt on a desolate beach, praying for guidance. Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca wrote in his journal, "God provided that one of the men should come, saying that he would make wooden flues and bellows of deerskin."



A crude blacksmith shop was built and in a month and a half, five barges were constructed by men who, of themselves, knew absolutely nothing of shipbuilding. Tales and manes of the horses, husk from the palmettos, pitch from small pines, and the Spaniards' clothing, all were used in the ship construction. The legs of the horses served as crude bags for carrying water.

More storms were to attack the company and in the worst of these, the stern commander Narvaez abandoned the barge of Cabeza de Vaca, choosing to save his own skin at any cost. Cabeza de Vaca never saw him again.

By the following spring, but fifteen survivors of the company of four hundred could be accounted for. They were held as slaves of the Indians on an island where each new day was a struggle for the bare necessities of life. Eight years later, Cabeza de Vaca, Andres Dorantes, Alonso del Castillo, and Estevanico the Negro were all that remained alive. Their fingers were raw and bleeding from long days of pulling edible reeds from the marshes. They were almost as much beast as human, scarce raising their heads toward the setting sun as they made

By

CONREY
BRYSON

their escape and wandered westward.

But weary and unshaven, bronzed and weatherbeaten, Cabeza de Vaca was still a white man, and as such he was soon to receive a marvelous manifestation of faith. When they came upon the next tribe of Indians, they were met outside the village by a group of braves carrying tunas, the flat cactus plants that served as their chief article of food. The white men were welcomed to the village and immediately led to a group of Indians who complained that their heads were very sore, and begged for relief.

The Spaniards protested that they were neither doctors nor medicine men, but so great was the pleading of the Indians that Cabeza de Vaca and his followers did the only thing that remained for them to do. They made sincere prayers to their maker for relief. The stricken Indians were healed, to a man! The Spaniards were surprised, but not the Indians. In their simple faith, the sick of the tribe came all night to be cured, bringing tunas and venison, a new delicacy for the Spaniards.

When the white men decided to move onward, the Indians begged them to remain, for winter was coming and there was little food ahead. All winter the four wanderers lived among the Indians, who always brought them the finest of their meager fare. And always there were the sick to be healed. In Cabeza de Vaca's report to the king of Spain, he says, "Nothing was talked about in this whole country but the wonderful cures which God, our Lord, performed through us."

The climax of these cures came when Cabeza de Vaca was called to a nearby village to treat an Indian

who had been badly wounded. When he approached the village, he saw that the wounded man's lodge had been torn down—a sign that he was dead. Cabeza de Vaca wanted to turn back, but the Indians begged him to exert his wonderful powers. His companions would not undertake to pray for the man's recovery, but Cabeza de Vaca laid his hands upon the still form, breathed upon it, and uttered a sincere prayer.

The Indians then brought others of their sick for healing. The Spaniard prayed for them, too. Then he quietly left the village, hardly daring to hope that his prayers would be answered. But next day the Indians came to inform him that the wounded man had arisen within an hour and eaten with them. By this time it was spring and the Spaniards continued westward.

From village to village, the Indians escorted the white men. Always the story was the same—the Indians would bring their children to be blessed upon the white man's knee. They would not partake of food until the white man had blessed it. Sometimes the Indians, approaching a camp of their enemies, would guide the white men as near as possible before making their retreat. Sometimes ancient feuds would be forgotten in order that both tribes might enjoy the blessings of the white man's visit.

In this manner, the four wanderers made their way across what is now South Texas, up the Rio Grande, and southward into Mexico. All along the route, they found evidence of a beautiful religious tradition among the natives. When the Spaniards tried to teach their Christian beliefs, the Indians told them that they already believed in one God in heaven who had created the world. Their fathers had taught them of such a God, and that his descendants would some day return. From tribe to tribe, Cabeza de Vaca was welcomed as the fair God or one of His descendants.

As they continued southward, the Spaniards began to hear frequent news of other white men, and realized that they were approaching New Spain. When they finally reached the Spaniards near Mexico City, the Indians who had accompanied Cabeza de Vaca fled in terror. When Cabeza de Vaca learned the reason of their fear, he was almost ready to turn back and resume his life among the Indians. These simple people who had provided him

with food, and many times saved his life, were being ruthlessly slaughtered and made slaves by the *conquistadores* of Cortez.

Alcaraz, the leader from Mexico City, realized the strange power that Cabeza de Vaca had over the natives, and ordered him to summon the Indians who had followed him. The Indians, who had been frightened at the sight of the conquerors of Mexico, seemingly had no fear as long as Cabeza de Vaca and his followers were with them. They believed that he would protect them from Spanish lances as he had protected them from disease and hunger.

Then Alcaraz tried to persuade the Indians that Cabeza de Vaca was of the same people as Alcaraz and his followers. An Indian leader answered him in this fashion, "He is a God, for he came from the East where the sun rises. You came from the West where the sun sets. He cures the sick, while you kill those that are healthy. He asks for nothing, and gives away that which is presented him, while you only steal and give nothing to anyone. He comes to make peace between our tribes. You come to make war."

Cabeza de Vaca noted with a heavy heart the many cruelties forced upon the luckless natives by their conquerors. He preached to them his own ideal of a God of love—an ideal developed through a decade of suffering. So readily did they understand, that entire villages which had been deserted in fear were repopulated in worship—until the Spanish warriors again felt the need of more slaves.

In his report to the king, Cabeza de Vaca urged, "May God in His infinite mercy grant that in the days of your majesty and under your power and sway, these people become willingly and sincerely subjects of the true Lord who created and redeemed them. We believe they will be, and that your majesty is destined to bring it about, as it will not be at all difficult."

A strange sequel to Cabeza de Vaca's story is that of the Negro, Estevanico. He learned in Mexico of strange and fabulously wealthy cities far to the northward—the Seven Cities of Cibola. Trying to capitalize upon the healing powers of his former leader, he made a journey toward those cities. But the Indians rejected him, and far up in what is now New Mexico they killed him. He was not the fair God of their ancestors.

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PERTINENT
THOUGHT
IN
War Times

This communication by a missionary in Hawaii, Elder James D. Cannon, son of Elder Sylvester Q. Cannon, was printed in the *Mauī News*:

Editor, *Mauī News*:

Money, time, and effort are being expended at the present time on projects that will insure a high morale for both soldiers and civilians. I have been impressed with the thought that we have been overlooking one means of building up the community morale. That is religion. We must realize that man is inherently religious, and without a full development of this nature within him his morale will be very low.

Wherever we turn we are confronted by war news. Of course, it is absolutely necessary that we realize the magnitude of our responsibility in our war effort, but like everything else, we need a change and a rest. Religion is the answer to this vital need.

Religion isn't just going to church on Sunday—it's a full week proposition. It can add tremendously to our individual and community well-being if we let its comforting warmth pervade our thoughts and actions throughout the week.

Abraham Lincoln in his time, and President Roosevelt in our time, have both proclaimed a special day for prayer when our nation was in the throes of war. They each fully realized the need for that regeneration of soul that accompanies communion with our Creator. We must admit that it plays a powerful influence upon man—think then what it will mean to have our fighting men go into battle spiritually armed with righteousness, knowing that there is an all-merciful Father in heaven who is watching over their destinies!

As Christians who are living in a country that was founded upon the principles of Christianity, we would be manifestly ignorant and presumptuous before our Creator if we denied Him a place in our lives. Let's stop for a few minutes in our unthinking hustle and ponder a bit on our indebtedness to God. Highly appropriate are the words of Abraham Lincoln in these times: "I am not at all concerned about whether the Lord is on the side of the North, for I know He is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side." We would do well to take measures that would insure our affiliation with the Lord's side.

Sincerely yours,

Wailuku ELDER D. JAMES CANNON