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Cultural Parallels
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and the New World

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Paul R. Cheesman

*T*he idea of ancient contact between the Old and the New World has been studied by so many scholars with so many varying solutions that there appears to be no consensus concerning the origin of the group whom we call the American Indians.

During the course of many years, investigators have adopted and refined the method of comparing one culture with another. In instances in which no written documents were available, artifacts formed the means by which scholars constructed a history. Naturally, the persuasive power of such comparisons of cultural parallels increased with the number of similarities successfully identified. To be sure, three or four cultural parallels could be due to chance. But as one reviews thoroughly the similarities, for instance, between the cultures of the Old World and the New World, one can now catalogue well over two hundred features common to both areas.

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The emerging picture points to a multiplicity of contacts between the two worlds. As an example of the impact of recent study, most museums in the United States dealing with the origin of the American Indian used to display maps indicating that they had migrated only across one route—the Bering Strait. Today, however, many major museums freely indicate the possibility of ancient transoceanic migration across both the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.

In this connection, the Book of Mormon carefully records three such migrations—one about 2400 B.C. and two others near the year 600 B.C. It is my personal opinion that many other groups came to this continent anciently, among whom were the Vikings and the Orientals.

In an interesting prophecy recorded in the Book of Mormon, Nephi quotes Lehi:

But, said he, notwithstanding our afflictions, we have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands; a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my seed. Yea, the Lord hath covenanted this land unto me, and to my children forever, and *also all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord* (2 Nephi 1:5; emphasis added).

In the world of scholarship, one notes two opposing viewpoints—that of the diffusionists and that of the independent inventionists. Advocates of the diffusionist view attribute similarities between the civilizations of the Old and the New World to transoceanic migrations between the Eastern and Western hemispheres. Independent inventionists maintain that the many similarities are accidental, exhibiting no contact, and are thus to be ascribed to parallel and independent developments in both worlds.

As research has continued, however, it has become increasingly clear in scholarly circles that the civilization of the New World resembles that of the Old in significant ways. The earlier question has now become more crucial: could all of these cultural similarities really be due to independent development or should they be attributed to contacts and trade between these major continents? In response, let us review several telling pieces of evidence, beginning with the issue of transoceanic travel.

According to modern research, a fairly small craft, if well constructed, is more likely to survive a long sea voyage than is a large vessel. Surprisingly, seaworthiness has little to do with size.¹ Perhaps this is a reason that Lehi and his small group included only one other family in their sea voyage. Although the earlier migrating Jaredites consisted of a few more families, that group came in eight vessels.

Concerning transoceanic contacts, Eric Reed supports the idea of such communication. From the multi-authored publication *Man Across the Sea* he quotes J. D. Baldwin, who said, "Certainly there is nothing unreasonable or improbable in the supposition that the countries on the Western Mediterranean . . . communicated with America in very remote antiquity; nor is it improbable that there was communication across the Pacific."² J. Hornell agrees in his conclusion that "the rafts of Ecuador and of coastal Asia probably are connected genetically."³ It is now believed that of sixty known drifts of Japanese junks into the Pacific, at least a dozen reached the American coast.⁴ In light of this, Edwin Doran, Jr., concludes: "There appears to be no question that rafts could have crossed the Pacific, repeatedly [and] in appreciable numbers."⁵ Moreover, while it is difficult to gauge the end result, Joseph Needham observed that "a fleet of 3000 young men and women, in 219 B.C., . . . sailed from China into the ocean, never to return."⁶

It is significant that the idea of transoceanic contacts is also supported by modern trans-Pacific and trans-Atlantic journeys made by explorers who have duplicated primitive conditions. For instance, one notes Thor Heyerdahl's excursion from Peru to Tuamotu in the Pacific, as well as his expedition in the *Ra II*, which sailed across the Atlantic. Further, in six months Eric de Bisschop sailed from Tahiti to the Juan Fernandez Islands, a distance of five thousand miles. He also made a trip of similar duration from Chile, via Callao in Peru, to Manihiki, a trip of seven thousand miles. Such cumulative observations argue persuasively for a theory of cultural diffusion between the Old and New World.

In this vein, Clinton R. Edwards supports the idea of

diffusion as follows: "From the standpoint of available nautical capabilities, ancient crossings of the Atlantic were entirely possible." Surely there cannot now be any question that before 1492 there were visitors between the New and the Old World in historic and even prehistoric times. The important question, however, is whether these visits brought a significant cultural import to the Americas.⁸

Not only has transoceanic contact from the Old World to the New gained the support of Dr. Gordon F. Ekholm and Dr. Robert Heine-Geldern of the staff of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, but they also agree, for example, that the columns and balustrades of Chichen Itza in Yucatan, as well as its decorative serpent motifs, are almost identical with those found in Java. Furthermore, they note similarities in the thrones and the artistic lotus motifs between India and Mayan countries.⁹

With regard to agricultural connections, the bottle gourd provides another interesting piece of the puzzle when one studies the mystery of the early inhabitants of America. Botanists observe that the gourd is very likely native to tropical Africa, or possibly southern Asia. Moreover, they suggest that the importing came by way of the Atlantic and insist that the seed must have been brought by man since it could not have survived lengthy soaking.¹⁰

Regarding the variety of racial characteristics found in pre-Columbian America, Constance Irwin writes:

How [are we] to account for such a conglomeration [in America]: an Egyptian sphinx, the Egyptian god Ra, and Assyrian style, and Negroid types—and in addition, as we have just seen, a bearded face of Semitic aspect? Where else on the face of the earth were these once blended?

Where else? In the ancient Orient, a term employed in scholarly convention to indicate the ancient Near East or the "Mediterranean East." More specifically, in the Syro-Palestinian region, including Phoenicia, which linked together the great river valleys of Egypt and Mesopotamia and freely partook of the cultures nurtured by both.¹¹

Concerning contacts with the Far East, it was archaeologist James A. Ford who suggested that the oldest type of pottery known in the Americas may have been introduced on the coast of Ecuador about five thousand years ago by

voyagers from Japan.¹² And the historian Alvin M. Joseph, Jr., noted: "Certainly, by at least 1500 B.C., Asians were capable of making long sea trips. Much later, perhaps as late as A.D. 500-1000 when the islands of Polynesia were first populated, other long-distance oceanic voyages may have been made in one or both directions between America and the Pacific Islands."¹³ In this connection, botanists have concluded that cotton seeds were carried to America from Asia in the second millennium B.C. Because the wind and birds have been eliminated as possible carriers, Constance Irwin suggests that a man in a vessel was the only alternative: "This much is certain: he came; civilized man from the Old World sailed across an ocean and landed somewhere in that general area where the higher American culture flourished in pre-Columbian times."¹⁴

In a related vein, some researchers conclude that burial practices as well as the mummies themselves indicate that white men must have come to the Peruvian plain in very early times. But Pierre Honore is even more emphatic, asserting that "there is stronger evidence still, amounting to positive proof, from plant life, particularly cotton and the sweet potato, and possibly maize as well."¹⁵

Many believe that America has been "discovered" several times. Some are of the opinion, for instance, that Leif Eriksson and his Nordic adventurers landed on the coast of Massachusetts some years before Columbus left Spain.¹⁶ Further, phallic symbols found in Central America have caused some speculation as to whether the people of India had made contact in the Americas. In addition, many Hebrew and Semitic resemblances appearing in the American Indian have led to the theory that there may be a connection here.¹⁷ While it is possible that many Old and New World similarities could be coincidental, there are so many similarities being found almost daily it would be better to remain open-minded. We should receive such observations as those noted above as lines in an emerging picture whose faint and bold strokes tend distinctly to portray cultural contacts rather than accidental traits that constitute mere curiosities.

Immediately following Columbus' discovery of America, Spain was the only country among all the European

powers that was in a position to enter upon conquests in the New World on a large scale. This, of course, was partly due to prior European wars which had already drained the resources of the other powers. From Adair's *History of the American Indians* we learn that the first Spanish priests who followed the conquistadors to this country were so amazed by the similarities between the Old and the New World that they believed the American Indians to be Hebrews.¹⁸

Similarly, the theory that the American Indians were the lost ten tribes of Israel was also a very popular notion at one time in colonial America. For example, William Penn wrote of the Indians of Pennsylvania as follows:

I found them with like countenance with the Hebrew race; and their children of so lively a resemblance to them that a man would think himself in Duke's Place or Barry Street in London, when he sees them. . . . Their worship consists in two parts, sacrifice and cantice [songs]. . . . They reckon by moons; they offer their first ripe fruits; they have a kind of feast of tabernacles; they are said to lay their altars with twelve stones.¹⁹

In a similar vein, Hyatt and Ruth Verrill wrote:

Unquestionably the real truth is that man came to America from the Old World via all of these various routes. Some came from Europe by way of Greenland, others across the Atlantic to South America, some via the Bering Straits, and others across the Pacific.²⁰

Elsewhere in their work, the Verrills pinpoint an exact people—the Sumerians—as being more like the people of Peru than any other Near Eastern people of whom we have record.

The results of Mrs. Verrill's work in conjunction with the author's wide first-hand knowledge of the ancient civilizations of Peru, would seem to prove conclusively that the pre-Incan civilization was brought to Peru ready made and fully developed by Sumerian (Phoenician) explorers and colonists 2000 to 2500 B.C.²¹

Indeed, for ancient peoples to find their way to America is well within the range of possibility. For example, a Buddhist monk in A.D. 400 was reported to have sailed from China to America and back in a Chinese junk.²²

Plenty of evidence, both valid and erroneous, has been advanced in numerous books and articles by profes-

sionals and amateurs alike. What was needed now in order to give the diffusionists a firm foundation for their views was the discovery of an eastern Mediterranean inscription, professionally excavated in an intact American archaeological context. Dr. Joseph Mahan ransacked the scientific literature from beginning to end in the late 1960s in an effort to find such an inscription in the annals of American archaeology. After years of painstaking investigation, Dr. Mahan came across an inscription found in 1885-86 by Cyrus Thomas at Bat Creek, Tennessee, under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution. Digging to the bottom of an "Indian" mound, Thomas had discovered nine undisturbed skeletons with an inscription partly under the skull of the main personage of the group. The sketch of the nine skeletons in the tomb and a photograph of the inscription, along with the report of the excavation, were published in Thomas's *Report on the Mound Explorations of the Bureau of Ethnology*.²³ Unfortunately he published the inscription upside-down and presumed it to be Cherokee, although the writing bears no resemblance to the Cherokee syllabary. After the inscription had been turned right side-up by Henriette Mertz, she recognized it as a Phoenician script. In August 1970 Dr. Mahan sent Dr. Cyrus H. Gordon a photograph of the inscription made from the stone itself, now deposited in the museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. He requested Dr. Gordon's opinion as a Semitist; Gordon subsequently confirmed the distinctively Jewish nature of the text.²⁴

The archaeological circumstances of this discovery rule out any chance of fraud or forgery, and the inscription confirms a migration of Jews from the Near East, possibly to escape the long hand of Rome after the disastrous Jewish defeats in A.D. 70 and 135. Thus the diffusionist view has been bolstered by this archaeological find, called the Bat Creek Stone, which was unearthed under the direction of professional archaeologists working for the Smithsonian Institution.²⁵

Let us also mention ancient coins in the New World. Dr. Norman Totten from Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts, has pursued research on ancient Old World coins found in America. And although he has yet to pub-

lish the results of his work (see his contribution to this volume), other material has come to light from the southeastern United States through an accidental discovery. In the 1820s, John Haywood, Chief Justice of the Tennessee Supreme Court, gathered material for his book entitled *Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee*, which was republished in 1959.²⁶ In this publication, Haywood described Roman coins found in Tennessee and adjacent states. Moreover, on 17 April 1967, the New York Yiddish newspaper *The Day-Jewish Journal* ran an article on Hebrew coins of the Bar Kokhba Rebellion (the second Jewish rebellion against Rome in A.D. 132-35) found by farmers near Louisville, Hopkinsville, and Clay City, Kentucky.²⁷

If some will persist in claiming that the civilization of the Americas developed independently from the Old World, they must adduce as much impressive evidence as have those who favor the theory of diffusion between the Old and the New World. From the information reviewed in this study, it would seem that ancient multiple contacts from the Old World are highly likely. At the same time, to be sure, it can also be agreed that one may hold a diffusionist view and still acknowledge that some cultural traits developed independently.

Although this chapter constitutes only a preliminary study, it is designed to emphasize the increasing number of cultural parallels to be found in both hemispheres. And while it is true that some cultural features could have developed independently, other examples noted above rather compellingly support a diffusionist view.

In the summer of 1985 I conducted a research study on this subject, visiting major museums and historical sites of the world in order to view, photograph, and catalogue the most prominent cultural similarities between the Old and the New World. The results of this research, along with the contributions of Thomas Ferguson and John Sorenson, provide us with an important aggregate of cultural parallels between these two global regions. It is summarized in the following list, arranged alphabetically, in order to give to the reader a brief overview.

Some Cultural Similarities Between
the Old and the New World

<i>A</i>	Burials	Figures holding up tables
Adobe brick manufacturing	Burnt offerings	Fishhooks
Altar (horned)	<i>C</i>	Flint blades of obsidian
Altars (other)	Calendars	Flutes
Anointing	Cannibalism	
Aqueducts	Caps	<i>G</i>
Arch (true/ corbelled)	Carved steles	Gold plates (writing on)
Architecture of 1000 pillars of S. India	Casting by lost wax	
Arrowheads of metal	Cement	<i>H</i>
Artificial tears on masks	Ceramics	Hair types
Avocado	Chickens	Half-pillars as door frames
	Chisels	Hand with eye
	Color representing	Headdresses
	Colors (tribal)	Helmet of Olmec
	Confession	Hierarchic society
	Cotton	Hieroglyphs
	Creation story	Highways
	Cross	Holy water
	Cylinder seals	Horses
<i>B</i>	<i>D</i>	Human sacrifice (adult and child)
Balance scales	Drain Pipes	
Ball courts	Double S sign	<i>I</i>
Banners	Double walls with mud for insulation	Idolatry
Baptism font		Incense burners
Bark cloth	<i>E</i>	Intentional defor- mation of skull
Beard (false)	Eagle and serpent motif of India	Irrigation
Bearded men	Earplugs	
Beaten sheets of metal	Embalming with oil	<i>J</i>
Bells	Embossed designs on pots	Jade carving
Bird-man deities		Jewelry
Blood sacrifice	<i>F</i>	
Bloodletting	Fasting	<i>K</i>
Blow gun	Feline	Knitting
Bone ornaments	Fertility figurines	
Bottle gourd	Festivals	<i>L</i>
Bottle-shaped underground cistern		Life symbol
Bow and arrow		Lima beans
Bread (sacred)		
Breastplates		
Bucket (ritual)		
Burial techniques		

Lime plaster
Loom
Lotus or water
lily

M

Maces
Maize
Masks (gold on
corpse)
Masks
Mathematics
Metal disc in
roof of mouth
of corpse
Metallurgy
Mirrors
Mosaic masonry
Mummification
Mural painting
Musical instruments
Musical scale

N

Needles
Net fishing
Nose rings

O

Obelisks
Observatories
Obsidian blades
Oil lamps
Overflowing vase
motifs

P

Paintings on
pottery
Panpipes
Paper or writing
surface
Parasol
Parcheesi
Parchment
Petroglyphs

Phallic symbols
Plants (amaranths;
bottle gourd;
coconut; cotton;
maize; peanut;
pineapple; plan-
tain; sweet potato)

Plastic floors
Plating
Potter's wheel
Pottery
Pregnant women
holding breasts
Priesthood
Purple dyes
Pyramid burial
Pyramid building

Q

Quipu

R

Red dye
Reed boats
Roads
Rope
Rudder-oar on
boats

S

Sacrifice of
doves and quail
Sandals
Sarcophagus of
stone
Scales
Seer stones
Self-mutilation
Serpent with 7
heads
Seven-day time
cycle
Shields
Short skirts for
warriors
Silk

Slavery
Slings
Sphinx
Spindle whorl
Spoon, plate, comb
Stamp seals
Stamps (flat)
Star of David
Stela
Stone boxes
Stucco
Sun worship
Sun dials
Swastika
Sweat rooms
Sweet potato

T

Tattoo
Temple atop
Temples and plat-
form
Terrace agriculture
Textiles
Tree of life symbol
Trephination
Tribes and chiefs
Tweezers of
metal

U

Umbrella (as a
symbol)

W

Weaving techniques
Wheel toys

Z

Zero concept

Notes

1. C. A. Borden, *Sea Quest* (Philadelphia: MacRae Smith, 1967), pp. 25, 164.
2. Eric K. Reed, "Commentary: Section I," citing J. D. Baldwin's *Prehistoric Nations* (1869), in *Man Across the Sea*, ed. Carrol L. Riley et al. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1971), p. 111.
3. J. Hornell, "South American Balsas: The Problem of Their Origin," *Mariners Mirror* 17 (1931): 355.
4. C. W. Brooks, "Report of Japanese Vessels Wrecked in the North Pacific from the Earliest Records to the Present Time," *Proceeding of the California Academy of Science*, 6 (1875): 50-66, especially p. 64 and the map following p. 50.
5. Edwin Doran, Jr., in *Man Across the Sea*, p. 135.
6. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 4, pt. 3 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 553.
7. Clinton R. Edwards, in *Man Across the Sea*, p. 299.
8. Herbert Baker, in *Man Across the Sea*, p. 438.
9. See, for example, Gordon F. Ekholm, "Diffusion and Archaeological Evidence," in *Man Across the Sea*, pp. 54-65, and the bibliography cited there for studies by both Ekholm and Heine-Geldern.
10. For a useful summary, consult Thomas W. Whitaker, "Endemism and Pre-Columbian Migration of the Bottle Gourd, *Lagenaria siceraria*," in *Man Across the Sea*, pp. 320-27.
11. Constance Irwin, *Fair Gods and Stone Faces* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963), p. 71.
12. Alvin M. Joseph, Jr., *The Indian Heritage of America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 101.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
14. Irwin, p. 281.
15. Pierre Honore, *In Quest of the White God* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1961), p. 143.
16. A number of medieval accounts of various crossings exist; see the partial summary in Frederick J. Pohl, *Atlantic Crossings before Columbus* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961).
17. An example of this sort of study is that by Alexander von Wuthenau, *Unexpected Faces in Ancient America* (New York: Crown, 1975).
18. James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: E. & C. Dilly, 1775), pp. 17-18, 37-38, 80-107; see also Samuel Cole Williams, *Adair's History of the American Indians* (Johnson City, Tenn.: Watauga Press, 1930), pp. 83-108.

19. Quoted in Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews*, 2d ed. (Poultney, Vt.: Smith and Shute, 1825), pp. 107, 108.
20. A. Hyatt Verrill and Ruth Verrill, *America's Ancient Civilizations* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1953), p. 11.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
22. Charles G. Leland, *Fusang* (London: Curzon Press, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973), pp. 25-26.
23. In the twelfth annual report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution (1890-91), pp. 393-94.
24. See Cyrus H. Gordon, *Before Columbus* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1971), pp. 179-82.
25. Further information can be obtained in *Science*, 2:5 (May 1971); Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Manuscripts vol. XXI.
26. *Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee* (Nashville: George Wilson, 1823), see pp. 178-84.
27. Gershon Jacobson, "Mataba'ot von Bar Kockbas Zeiten Gefunden in Teil von Kentucky," *Day-Jewish Journal*, 53:22, p. 220.