



Type: Magazine Article

Indian Traditions of the Book of Mormon

Author(s): Milton R. Hunter

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 58, No. 6 (June 1955), pp. 430–432

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Abstract: Compares oral traditions of Native American tribes that correspond to Book of Mormon stories. Two ancient Mayan writings, the *Works of Ixtlilxochitl* and the *Popol Vuh*, possess remarkable parallels with the Book of Mormon.

a true heart and a right mind would rejoice in. He is perfect. He is love. He is righteousness. He is truth, the perfection of all things, and is devoting his great power and his whole being to the loving and saving of the children of men.

Why should we not accept him with all our hearts? Only because of our shortcomings! It is not because of our superior knowledge and intelligence that we reject Jesus Christ. It is because we lack in superior knowledge and intelligence and humility and meekness that he is rejected. If we will be faithful and humble, as the brethren have said in this conference, and keep his commandments, we will know of his divinity, and it will be our salvation and our exaltation.

Read the ninety-third section of the Doctrine and Covenants, on the matter of obedience. It is by keeping the commandments of God that we will gain in light and truth until we are filled with light and truth and know all things and become like unto our Father in heaven. The thing that prevents that is, as the revelation says, that Satan takes from us light and truth through disobedience.

And that wicked one cometh and taketh away light and truth, through disobedience,

from the children of men, and because of the traditions of their fathers. (D. & C. 93: 39.)

If you keep not my commandments, the love of the Father shall not continue with you, therefore you shall walk in darkness. (*Ibid.*, 95:12.)

Anything that we wish to attain or should attain to that is desirable, noteworthy, lovely, of good repute, that will be to our salvation and exaltation in the kingdom of God will be attained by the principle of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

I bear my humble witness that he is Christ, the Son of the Living God, that this is his Church and kingdom and that it is spreading throughout the earth and will continue to spread. In this conference there has been the announcement of a new era when on a worldwide basis the Church is to be visited regularly and supervised regularly, and we have seen plans put into effect that when finished will give us a line of temples that will encircle the globe—outposts of the kingdom of God.

I bear witness that this spreading will continue until it covers the earth and the will of God will be done. Give us power, I pray, O Father, that we may be true and faithful to these ends, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

satisfaction regarding what they were taught, declaring that the Book of Mormon was truly the sacred record of their ancestors which had been preserved for their enlightenment.

In the April issue of *THE IMPROVEMENT ERA*, Elder Golden R. Buchanan, president of the Southwest Indian Mission, described some of the traditions of the Indians with whom he has been working. He wrote: "The people lost their records and their 'books.'" But as the Hopis say,

We were not left without hope; we were told some day young white men with blue eyes would come knocking at Hopi doors and would bring back to us our records and our true story. They would come from the east and that we would know them by their outstretched hands, and they would call us "my brother" and "my sister."²

There may be people who would question the validity of the evidences in the examples I have given of Indian traditions of the Book of Mormon, maintaining that these evidences have all come forth since the publishing of that book and may have been instigated by it or by the Mormon missionaries. Be that as it may!

The important question for our consideration, however, is: Are there any important documents available which were written by the Indians prior to the publishing of the Book of Mormon which furnish evidence that these people had traditions which came down from their ancestors to the effect that their progenitors at a certain time in the distant past had possessed an important, sacred, religious book, which book could be identified as the Book of Mormon?

I shall answer that question in the affirmative. Yes, we do have some very important documents which were written between two and three hundred years prior to the publishing of the Book of Mormon which make the claim that many years ago the ancestors of the American Indians possessed an important, sacred book. These writings are so explicit that one could easily believe that the ancient records spoken of by the Indian writers are the same records as the ones from which the Book of Mormon was translated by the Prophet.

The first of these Indian writings of great significance which shall be referred to is the *Works of Ixtlilxochitl*, written by an Indian of the royal family in Mexico approximately 1600 A.D. In these writings he accounts the history, traditions, and religious beliefs of his people from the time of the migration of the first group from the Tower of Babel—continuing with the emigrations from over the sea of two other groups—and on down to the Spanish conquest.

The most pertinent portion of his book in relationship to our subject today deals with a very important character called Hueman. He and his work are described at great length in several different places in the *Works of Ixtlilxochitl*, his unusual accomplishments being highly extolled. If one was to study thoughtfully Ixtlilxochitl's account

Indian Traditions of The Book of Mormon

by Milton R. Hunter

OF THE FIRST COUNCIL OF THE SEVENTY

MY DEAR brethren and sisters, I humbly ask an interest in your faith and prayers and that the Spirit of God may direct what I may say today. I would like to speak briefly on the subject of "Indian Traditions of the Book of Mormon."

Since the publishing of that sacred scripture on March 26, 1830, a number of missionaries have been informed by various Indians that according to their traditions their progenitors in the distant past had possessed a sacred, religious book, which volume had disappeared; and a prominent factor in those traditions is the claim that that sacred record would be possessed again by the American Indians. On a number of occasions these people have identified the Book of Mormon as the record of their ancestors for which, in accordance with their traditions, they had been waiting and seeking.

Elder Glen G. Fisher, former president of the Western Canadian Mission,

wrote an article which was published in *THE IMPROVEMENT ERA* in March 1952, in which he graphically described the experiences had in 1908 by Chief Yellow Face and his Cree Indians in their search for the sacred book of their ancestors.¹ They came from northern Canada to southern Alberta, camped on the Mormon ranch, and during several months' time patiently waited for an opportunity to get a copy of the Book of Mormon and be taught its contents, because they knew that this book was the record of their ancestors. After they had learned of the purpose of the sojourn of Chief Yellow Face and members of his tribe, some of the Latter-day Saints who worked on the Mormon ranch spent evening after evening teaching the Indians the contents of the Book of Mormon. The Indian chief and his followers expressed much joy and deep

¹Glen G. Fisher, "Chief Yellow Face," *THE IMPROVEMENT ERA*, (Salt Lake City, March 1952), pp. 148-150, 180-184.

²Golden R. Buchanan, "Indian Traditions," *ibid.*, (Salt Lake City, April 1955), p. 285.

of Hueman and compare it with the portrayal of the character, personality, activities, and various accomplishments of Mormon as described in the Nephite record, one could easily identify the two men as being the same individual.³ For example, their names are quite similar—the one in the Indian manuscript being called Hueman and the other in the Nephite account being called Mormon. Each is claimed to have been a great prophet of God. Each is claimed to have been the head general of the army.⁴ Each is claimed to have been instrumental in bringing about a treaty of peace in 350 A.D., which treaty is claimed to have lasted for ten years.⁵ And the last comparison which I shall make, and probably the most pertinent one to our subject today is: Each is claimed to have been the compiler of a very important religious record which delineated the religious beliefs and history of the inhabitants of ancient America.⁶

Since each of us is more or less acquainted with the account given in the Nephite record of Mormon's activities, under the direction of the Lord, in taking a thousand years accumulation of records and from them compiling and abridging in one book the story of his people, which momentous task was completed by his son Moroni and brought forth in the latter days under the title of the Book of Mormon, I shall not spend time to discuss that point further. I would like, however, to quote directly from the *Works of Ixtlilxochitl* wherein he described Hueman as a collector and compiler of the sacred records of his people. While meditating on this particular quotation, the thought came to me that upon reading this quotation one could easily imagine that he was reading the Nephite account of Mormon's activities as a writer and keeper of records. To quote from the sixteenth century Indian document:

And before going on I want to make an account of Hueman, the astrologer. . . . Before dying he gathered together all the histories the Tultecas had, from the creation of the world up to that [his] time, and had them pictured in a very large book, where were pictured all their persecutions and hardships, prosperities and good happenings, kings and lords, laws and good government of their ancestors, old sayings and good examples, temples, idols, sacrifices, rites and ceremonies that they had, astrology, philosophy, architecture, and the other arts, good as well as bad, and a resumé of all the things of science, knowledge, prosperous and adverse battles, and many other things; and he entitled his book calling it *Teoamaxtli*, which, well interpreted means *Various Things of God and Divine Book*: The natives now call the Holy Scriptures [meaning the Bible] *Teoamoxtli*, because it is almost the same, . . .⁷

This marvelous quotation describing the activities of Hueman in writing or compiling a very important book is so

similar to the Nephites' account of Mormon's activities that such a quotation constitutes a noteworthy Book of Mormon evidence.

The second example which I shall give of an early Indian document which contains numerous, marvelous evidences sustaining the claims made by the Book of Mormon is known today as the *Popol Vuh*.⁸ The original manuscript was written in the Quiché language by a Quiché-Maya Indian in faraway Guatemala, Central America, nearly three hundred years before the Prophet Joseph Smith published the account translated from the Nephites' records. Between the years 1554 and 1558 A.D., an Indian at Chichicastenango, Guatemala, wrote what has become accepted by scholars as a very important and unusual document in which he delineated the mythology, beliefs, and traditions of his people.⁹ The Quiché-Maya Indian author claimed that there was a prevalent tradition among his people that his ancestors in the distant past had at one time possessed an important, religious, sacred book which had disappeared, being had no more by his people, and so he wrote his manuscript to replace that lost book.

Father Francisco Ximenez, a Catholic priest who officiated in the St. Tomas church at Chichicastenango, obtained the manuscript from the Quiché-Maya Indians approximately 1600 A.D. No doubt he had won their good will and thereby was able to borrow this manuscript for the purpose of translating it from Quiché into the Spanish language. After his work was completed, Father Ximenez's translation of the Indian document remained in manuscript form for approximately two hundred fifty years before it was discovered and published in the Spanish language. Since that time it has appeared in several Spanish editions, as well as in French and German. It was not until five years ago (1950), however, that it was translated and published for the first time in English, the translation being made by Delia Goetz and the famous Mayan scholar, Sylvanus G. Morley.

When the Quiché-Maya manuscript was first written, it had no title. The Indian writer claimed that the lost Quiché book was called the *Popol Vuh*, and so it was natural for the publisher of this sixteenth century document to call it the *Popol Vuh* after the name of the lost Quiché-Maya book. The meaning of *Popol Vuh*, according to the sixteenth century document, is *The Book of the People*, or *The Book of the Princes*, or *The Book of the Community*. It seems that those titles, according to the content of the Book of Mormon, would also be very fitting for the Nephite records.

I shall now quote directly from the *Popol Vuh* and let each one evaluate in his mind the possibility of this record referring to the Book of Mormon records

as they were when possessed by the people of ancient America:

This we shall write now under the Law of God and Christianity; we shall bring it to life because now the *Popol Vuh*, as it was called, cannot be seen any more, in which was clearly seen the coming from the other side of the sea and the narration of our obscurity, and our life was clearly seen. The original book written long ago, existed, but its sight is hidden to the searcher and to the thinker. Great were the descriptions and the account of how all the sky and the earth were formed, . . .¹⁰

In speaking of the original *Popol Vuh* which the ancestors of the Quiché-Maya Indians had possessed in the distant past, the late Dr. Sylvanus G. Morley, possibly the greatest of the Mayan scholars, wrote as follows:

The *Popol Vuh* was also the book of prophecy and the oracle of the kings and lords, [Certainly that is exactly what the Book of Mormon was. Then he continues:] according to a reference which the author of the Manuscript makes in another passage, where he states that [Morley quoting directly from the sixteenth century document] "Great lords and wonderful men were the marvelous kings. . . . They knew if there would be war, and everything was clear before their eyes; they saw if there would be death and hunger, if there would be strife. They well knew that there was a place where it could be seen, that there was a book which they called the *Popol Vuh*."¹¹

This quotation reminds one of King Mosiah and King Benjamin, great Nephite prophets, seers, and revelators.

The late Dr. Morley adds the following interesting comment:

And in the final paragraph, the Quiché chronicler adds with a melancholic accent that what he has said in his works is all that has been preserved of the ancient Quiché, "because no longer can be seen (the book of the *Popol Vuh*) which the kings had in olden times, for it had disappeared."¹²

Since the time that Father Francisco Ximenez translated the sixteenth century *Popol Vuh* from Quiché into Spanish, scholars have done much speculating regarding this lost Indian book. They have made guesses regarding its authorship, the language in which it was written, the writing materials used, its probable contents, and numerous other things. For example, as early as 1600 A.D. Father Ximenez wrote:

The truth is that such a book never appeared nor has been seen, and thus it is not known if this way of writing was by painting, as those of Mexico, or by knotting string as the Peruvians; you may believe that it was by painting on woven white cloth.¹³

Probably one of the most intriguing subjects regarding the lost book of the Quiché-Maya on which scholars have speculated is: "What has become of the original *Popol Vuh*?" Of course none of them has known the answer to that question any more than they have known the answers to the other ques-

(Continued on following page)

³*Works of Ixtlilxochitl*, cited in, Milton R. Hunter and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon* (Oakland, California, 1950), pp. 337-346.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 342-354.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 349-370.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 337-338, 341-342.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 337-338.

⁸*Popol Vuh*, The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiche-Maya, (Eng. tr. by Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley, Norman, Oklahoma, 1950), pp. 1-767.

⁹To quote the late Dr. Morley: "This manuscript is, without doubt, the most vigorous, literary, and significant effort achieved by the American Indian in the field of mythology and history." *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 19, 225.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 19, 234-235.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 18.

tions on this subject on which they have speculated. It is my firm opinion that we as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have a far better chance to know the answers to such questions than do the scholars, because of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the numerous appearances of the Angel Moroni, and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Since I firmly believe that the Quiché-Maya Indians of Guatemala are descendants of the Book of Mormon peoples of ancient America, as I believe also that other Indians trace back to the same ancestry, it is but natural for me to regard the lost Quiché-Maya *Popol Vuh*, which disappeared from among the ancestors of the Quichés many, many years ago, to be the Book of Mormon records. It is evident that they were lost or disappeared when Moroni, the last historian of the Nephite race, hid them in the Hill Cumorah in 421 A.D. A knowledge of the activities of the compilers of the ancient records, their contents, and finally their sudden disappearance was carried down from age to age by the Indians through tradition to the sixteenth century, when at that time a Quiché-Mayan recorded the traditions of his people, according to the late Dr. Morley,

... as a substitute for the *Libro Nacional* [original *Popol Vuh* or lost book from which "the kings used to read"¹⁴], as a revision and a new version of the accounts which had been preserved in the venerable book which had already disappeared.¹⁵

In our present discussion, I have purposely presented Indian traditions of the Book of Mormon from four widely separated sections of the country: the first from Canada; the second from Arizona; the third from Mexico; and the fourth from Guatemala. My purpose was to show that traditions prevailed somewhat universally among the various American Indian tribes to the effect that their ancestors in the distant past had possessed an important, sacred, religious book, which volume had disappeared, but, according to many of the traditions, would be mysteriously preserved and eventually brought again to the descendants of the inhabitants of ancient America. It is obvious that these traditions fit well with what has actually happened in regard to the Book of Mormon.

Why should not the Indians have received through tradition the knowledge of the fact that their progenitors in ancient America had had a sacred book written for them, since evidence is abundant in the Book of Mormon which shows clearly that the Lamanites were well aware of the fact that their rivals were record keepers and that the prophets had predicted the eventual destruction of the Nephite nation and the preservation of the records for the Lamanites' descendants? For example,

Enos, the son of Jacob and a record keeper, knowing that the Lamanites had

... swore in their wrath that, if it were possible, they would destroy our [the Nephites'] records and us, and also all the traditions of our fathers. [praying diligently, asking] ... that the Lord God would preserve a record of my people, the Nephites ... that it might be brought forth at some future day unto the Lamanites ...

... and he covenanted with me that he would bring them [the records] forth unto the Lamanites in his own due time ...

And the Lord said unto me: Thy fathers have also required of me this thing; and it shall be done unto them according to their faith; ...

... I Enos went about among the people of Nephi, ... testifying of the things I had heard and seen.¹⁶

The latter two historians of the Nephite nation, like the prophets during the early period, had firm convictions that the records would be preserved and brought forth in the latter days to the descendants of the Lamanites. Shortly before his death, Mormon recorded in the records a sermon to the descendants of the Lamanites in which he said:

... I would speak somewhat unto the remnant of this people who are spared, ... For behold, this is written for the intent that ye ... will know concerning your fathers, and also the marvelous works which were wrought by the power of God among them.¹⁷

Following Mormon's death and after

¹⁶Enos 13-19.
¹⁷Mormon 7:1, 9.

Moroni had completed the abridgment of the Jaredite records, he wrote:

Wherefore, I write a few more things contrary to that which I had supposed; ... that perhaps they may be of worth to my brethren, the Lamanites, in some future day, according to the will of the Lord.¹⁸

I bear witness that the Book of Mormon contains the word of God and that it was written originally by holy prophets with the knowledge that it would be preserved to be brought forth in the latter days for the benefit of the descendants of the Lamanites—the American Indians. In fact, one of the declared purposes of writing and preserving that sacred book is proclaimed in its preface, which declares that it was "... written to the Lamanites."

Since the knowledge of all the things of which I have spoken was so widely had by the Nephites, it is my firm conviction that the Lamanites were also fully aware of the records and the promises contained therein to their posterity. Following the close of Nephite history, certainly the Lamanites and their Indian descendants would hand such knowledge down from age to age by tradition to the present time, which has actually happened; and so it is easily understandable why the Indians who live in various parts of the Americas have similar traditions of the Book of Mormon. These Indian traditions, to my way of thinking, provide important evidences sustaining the claims made by the Nephite writers—thereby constituting additional important Book of Mormon evidences.

I bear witness to these things, and I do so in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹⁸Moroni 1:4.

Wednesday Afternoon Session, April 6, 1955

"Men Are, That They Might Have Joy"

by Adam S. Bennion

OF THE COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE

FOR MYSELF and for all of you, I express gratitude to these Singing Mothers. I am grateful that the loveliness of their lullabies has been sublimated into the holiness of their hymns under the inspirational leadership of Sister [Florence Jepperson] Madsen.

Those of us who sit here this afternoon, still subject to our turn, know that this is the hour. It reminds me of the time when we used to play musical

chairs. You remember when we gathered in a circle around the chairs and the host took a chair out each time around, so that there was one chair fewer than people. We knew when we got down to the last three or four chairs that that was it. Well, the chairs have all been taken out but three!

Brother Richard Evans and I have been sitting here together for three days, observing to each other that there is

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 61.
¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 20.