



Type: Magazine Article

Archaeology and the Book of Mormon, Part XI-A: Symbols of Quetzalcoatl and Teotihuacan

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (April 1956)

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

Page(s): 239–241, 282

Abstract: This series is a comprehensive compilation of archaeological artifacts in Mesoamerica that relate to Book of Mormon places and peoples. It is copiously illustrated with photographs of buildings, pottery, statues, and carvings. The series includes evidences of Christ's appearance to the Americas and reviews ancient Mayan writings, including *Title of the Lords of Totonicapan*, the *Popol Vuh*, the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, and the *Works of Ixtlilxochitl*. The author also discusses white and dark people in ancient America. The eleventh part begins a discussion of Quetzalcoatl and Teotihuacan.

ARCHAEOLOGY and the BOOK OF MORMON

by President Milton R. Hunter
OF THE FIRST COUNCIL OF THE SEVENTY

Part XI-A Symbols of Quetzalcoatl and Teotihuacan

TEOTIHUACAN, situated approximately thirty miles northeast of Mexico City, is perhaps the outstanding tourist attraction in the valley of Mexico. No one can really claim to have seen our neighboring country to the south if he has not been shown Teotihuacan (Tä'ô-të'wä-kän'); and so—like all other American tourists—I placed that famous archaeological site on my itinerary during my first visit to Mexico in 1941.

When we arrived at Teotihuacan, our Mexican guide—who had resided half of his time in the United States and thereby knew both English and Spanish equally well and also the customs of both peoples—took us first to the Pyramid of the Moon. We were informed that this impressive structure, dating in the B.C. period,¹ rises 115 feet high on a quadrangular base that measures 329 feet by 411 feet.

This pyramid was truncated at the top, where undoubtedly a temple stood. From a spacious court, a broad stairway once led up the south side of the ascending planes, which were broken to provide terraces.²

Our guide next took us to the Pyramid of the Sun. It towered

¹Archaeology in Mexico (Mexico City, 1952), p. 14.
²Ibid.



South half of the west face of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan, Mexico. Observe coatl (serpent) heads surrounded by quetzal feathers, symbols of the "White Bearded God" or Quetzalcoatl.

majestically above all other structures of that archaeological site, rising to a height of over 200 feet. Its base measured almost 700 feet on each side. The structure was built of adobe bricks and was solid throughout. The exterior was faced with volcanic stone covered with "pre-Spanish cement."

Five bodies in form of truncated pyramids, one on top of another and diminishing in size so as to form terraces, make up the pyramid proper. Here, too, on top, was a small temple, dedicated to the cult of Tonacatecutli, God of Sun, of warmth and of abundance. The temple was crowned with a gigantic monolithic statue of the god adorned with a gold breast plate that returned with almost equal brilliance the rays of the sun struck it. Like so many other fine works of art of the ancient Mexicans, this statue was destroyed by the orders of Fray Juan de Zumarrago, Mexico's first

Archbishop, in his zeal to abolish pagan rites.³

I readily recognized the fact that both pyramids in shape, size, and purposes of construction had certain resemblances to ancient pyramids, or temple-towers, of Egypt,⁴ Assyria and Babylon, which is a significant fact, since the Book of Mormon claims that the Jaredites came from the great Tower of Babel⁵ in Babylon and that the Nephites brought with them a considerable amount of Egyptian culture.⁶

We followed southward along a road called "Road of the Dead,"⁷ because of numerous human skeletons discovered by the early Spanish settlers along its length, and came to the Temple of Quetzalcoatl (kët-säl'kô-ät'l).

The temple is situated toward the east of a great stadium or quadrangle,

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CORRECTION: The reference in the second quotation from the bottom of page 176 of the March magazine should read 3 Nephi 2:14-15, instead of *Ibid.*, 2:14-15. Otherwise the article gives the wrong reference in all the quotations following in this interesting parallel.

³Ibid., p. 15.

⁴Milton R. Hunter and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon* (Oakland, 1950), pp. 264-273.

⁵Ether 1:1-6, 32-43.

⁶1 Nephi 1:2; Mosiah 1:4; Mormon 9:32-33.

⁷Archaeology in Mexico Today, op. cit., p. 15.



Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan, from the west, front view. Observe its likeness to pyramids in Egypt. —Photo by Otto Done



Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan. Photographed from the west. Side view of the pyramid.

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surrounded by low walls upon which temples stand. Stairs lead up the west side of these "temples, where undoubtedly religious festivities were celebrated" anciently.⁸ Four small temples or platforms stand on the north wall, four on the west, and four on the south, with three larger ones on the east.

Directly in front of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl stands a rather large pyramid or temple which we were informed was erected by the Toltecs at a much later date than the temple erected in honor of the "White Bearded God." Our touring party went to the southeast corner of the Toltec temple or pyramid, and there, arising majestically only a few feet east of the pyramid, stood another temple whose west face was adorned with heads of serpents surrounded by representations of feathers.

Our guide remarked:

"This is the famous Temple of Quetzalcoatl. It was built by an ancient people called by some writers the Teotihuacanos and by others the Toltecs. This temple was erected during the early Christian centuries, perhaps as early as the seventh century A.D. Dr. George C. Vaillant, director of the University of Pennsylvania Mu-

seum, gives the date for the beginning of the temple as 666 A.D. Vaillant points out that "The Feathered Serpent is the dominant decorative motive, and the great heads carved in rugged simplicity project from the balustrade and from the façades." These serpents heads, as you have observed, are surrounded with what represents quetzal feathers. Both the serpent heads and quetzal feathers are symbols of Quetzalcoatl, the 'White Bearded God.'"⁹

We soon learned that

Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent, most revered god, was more frequently represented on pottery and in decoration [at Teotihuacan] than any other subject.¹⁰

⁸George C. Vaillant, *The Aztecs of Mexico* (New York, 1950), pp. 71, 79.

¹⁰*Archaeology in Mexico Today*, op. cit., p. 13.

Two "Plumed Serpents," symbols of Quetzalcoatl, hewn out of stone. National Museum, Mexico City.

—Photo by Otto Done



Speaking of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, archaeologists declare that

This is a representation of Quetzalcoatl. . . . [And in addition to the serpent heads and quetzal feathers] as proof that this temple was erected in honor of the Feathered Serpent, we see on the wall an enormous sculptured serpent, of the rattlesnake species, symbol of Quetzalcoatl.¹¹

I carefully observed what appeared to me at that time to be grotesque serpent heads with mouths filled with large, hideous teeth. Since I was a member of the Church of Jesus Christ, I was quite familiar with the Book of Mormon's account of the appearance of Jesus Christ to the inhabitants of ancient America following his resurrection; and I had also heard that he

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 15.

had been identified with Quetzalcoatl. As I looked at those hideous serpent heads I thought: "I see nothing here that reminds me of the beautiful account in the Book of Mormon of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. These snake heads are repulsive and ugly. They are pagan representations or idols."

After returning to Utah from Teotihuacan, having had time to think more carefully, I realized that I had been looking through the eyes of a member of the true Church of Jesus Christ. My religious background had caused me to judge the symbols of Quetzalcoatl by the standard of the marvelous teachings of the Book of Mormon, the great revelations regarding Jesus recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants, and the astounding doctrines contained in the Pearl of Great Price and the Bible.

Since these standards were far superior and differed entirely from what I saw at Teotihuacan, my judgment was faulty; and so I decided that I must study archaeology and Indian traditions in order that I might more aptly place myself in the position of the pagan worshipers of Quetzalcoatl and thereby understand

Coatl or horned serpent head from staircase of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan.



—Photo by Otto Done

the significance of serpents and quetzal feathers as symbols of Quetzalcoatl or Jesus Christ. This I immediately undertook.

Thirteen years elapsed, and I made my second trip to Teotihuacan. This time I was accompanied by President and Sister Claudious Bowman, José Dávila, and Sister Hunter. I also returned there the following year with a touring party. On each of these occasions we visited the famous Quetzalcoatl Temple and quadrangle.

I now possessed a background and viewpoint far different from the one I had had on my first trip. I saw much more and certainly had a clearer understanding than I had had on my first visit to the Temple of Quetzalcoatl. I felt that now, at least to a certain degree, I was able to think, feel, understand, and appreciate as had the ancient builders of Teotihuacan.

The following discussion will portray my transition of understanding and feelings during the past fifteen years.

By 400 A.D. the religion of the Nephites and Lamanites had degenerated into pagan practices, and the former people as a nation had been exterminated in a terrible war fought on and near the Hill Cumorah. The survivors of that last war—some of whom were white in color and of Nephite stock and other bronze in color and of Lamanite lineage¹²—held sacred in their memories and

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Quetzal bird — national bird of Guatemala and symbol of Quetzalcoatl.

¹²Milton R. Hunter, "Archaeology and the Book of Mormon," *THE IMPROVEMENT ERA* (Salt Lake City, 1955), No. 7, vol. 58, p. 498.

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PRESIDENT MCKAY HONORED FOR 50 YEARS OF SERVICE

(Concluded from preceding page)
and designated the site for the temple in New Zealand.

It would be difficult indeed to find a subject that President McKay has not excelled in, and many volumes could be written detailing his contributions to the Church.

He has spent a full lifetime of activity and love in the Sunday Schools. At the time of his call to the Apostleship in April 1906, he was serving as assistant superintendent of the Sunday Schools of the Weber (Utah) Stake. In October 1906 he was sustained as second assistant general superintendent of the Sunday Schools; in April 1909 he was called as first assistant general superintendent; and in November 1918, he was sustained as general superintendent of this organization. He was general superintendent until he was sustained as a member of the First Presidency in October 1934.

Of President David O. McKay, President Joseph Fielding Smith has written:

He never compromises with evil; his soul is upright; and he has through his kindness and devotion obtained the universal love of the people. (*The Deseret News "Church Section,"* September 5, 1951.)

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has always pioneered in making its meeting places something more than just preaching halls, but as one looks back over the span of President McKay's ministry—to 1906, when classes of the auxiliary organizations met in corners of the chapels (sometimes curtains were drawn to separate one class from another) or in dingy classroom space in the basements; and compare it with the well-lighted classrooms and the visual aids that are available now, one must surely exclaim, "What a difference!" Still the most effective teaching tool available to the Church in 1956 as it was in 1906 is the consistent life of a faithful member. That is the gift that President McKay has given to the Church during all of his eventful official ministry.

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traditions the knowledge of the greatest event that ever occurred in ancient America, namely, the visitation of Jesus Christ, the resurrected Lord, to their progenitors in the Book of Mormon days. Although a universal apostasy prevailed, the teachings received directly from the Master having been adulterated, yet certain

momentous events had made an everlasting impression on the inhabitants of ancient America. The greatest of these was the appearance of Jesus Christ to the inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere, as was explained in the three previous articles of this series in the ERA.

(To be continued)

EZRA TAFT BENSON

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the government. Elder Benson sought an appointment with the general in charge and was flatly refused. The plight of the people was so desperate that he refused to take no for an answer. He turned to the Lord for help through fasting and prayer. "Before long," he tells us, "a spirit of assurance replaced my troubled anxiety. 'The Lord,' I thought, 'is sharing his strength with me.' An impelling force urged me to seek another audience with the general.

"I approached the general's adjutant with a new surge of confidence. Minutes later I was granted an audience. The general heard me through and graciously acceded to our request."

Divine assistance was also necessary to get him into Poland.

In Finland, Elder Benson selected an appropriate spot and dedicated that land to the preaching of the gospel.* Meanwhile in Salt Lake Sister Benson continued, as usual, to take the major responsibility in rearing the family. Although she missed him greatly, her plucky spirit and desire to have him share his time in service to others was a real inspiration to many who realized that already his church and business travels had taken him away from home about half of their married life.

*This was a rededication of that land. Elder Francis M. Lyman of the Council of the Twelve, then serving as president of the European Mission, dedicated Finland in August 1903. (See *THE IMPROVEMENT ERA*, 6:923.)

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA