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Abstract: This article provides several legends and descriptions of the “feathered serpent” god called Quetzalcoatl and links Jesus Christ and his visit to the Americas (3 Nephi) with him. Quetzalcoatl was known as a light complexioned wise benefactor. After having spent some time with the ancestors of the Aztecs, he promised to return to them.

Quetzalcoatl*

A Deity of Pre-Historic America

BY ALTON C. MELVILLE

MANY and varied types of gods are worshiped among the Indians, but one in particular looms above all others in importance and universality of worship among the natives of Mexico and Central America. It is the great Quetzalcoatl of the Aztecs and Toltecs, and called Kukulcan among the Mayas. There are other names attached to him, probably being better known and often typified as the Feathered Serpent in their religious and decorative art. An infinite number of temples have been raised to him and everywhere in this vicinity, in South America and as far north as the United States as well, his statue, picture or serpentine symbol may be found.

His position among their deities is outstanding and definite and very unique. Although the various accounts of the ancient traditions surrounding him may vary in some details, and perhaps the traditions themselves are slightly different in some instances, there are well established written and verbal accounts of this great character which come to us in agreement as to the general run of the story, as well as in most of the details, particularly as to his personal description and his unusual arrival and departure. A usual version of the advent of Quetzalcoatl, quoting from Bancroft, is as follows:

"He was a white man, of portly person, broad brow, great eyes, long, black hair, and large, round beard; of exceedingly chaste and quiet life, and of great moderation in all things. The people had at least three reasons for the great love, reverence and devotion with which they regarded him. First, he taught them the silversmith's art, a craft the Cholulans greatly pride themselves on; second, he desired no sacrifice of the blood of man or animals, but delighted only in offerings of bread, roses and other flowers of perfumes and sweet odors; third, he prohibited and forbade all war and violence. Nor were these qualities esteemed only in the city of his chiefest labors and teachings; from all the land came pilgrims and devotees to the shrine of the gentle god. Even the enemies of Cholula came and went secure, in fulfilling their vows; and the lords of distant lands had in Cholula their chapels and idols to the common object of devotion and esteem. And only Quetzalcoatl among all the gods was pre-eminently called Lord; in such sort, that when anyone swore, saying, By Our Lord, he meant Quetzalcoatl and no other; though there were many other highly esteemed gods. For indeed the service of this god was gentle, neither would he demand hard things but light, and he taught only virtue, abhorring

*Author's note: The writer does not pose as authority for the information herein, but rather chooses to rely on the recognized authorities; hence the frequent quotations and the bibliography at the conclusion of this article.

all evil and hurt. Twenty years this deity remained in Cholula, then he passed away by the road he had come, carrying with him four of the principal and most virtuous youths of that city. He journeyed for a hundred and fifty leagues till he came to the sea, in a distant province called Goatzacoalco. Here he took leave of his companions and sent them back to their city, instructing them to tell their fellow-citizens that a day should come in which white men would land upon their coasts, by way of the sea in which the sun rises; brethren of his and having beards like his; and that they should rule that land. The Mexicans waited for the accomplishment of this prophecy, and when the Spaniards came they took them for the descendants of their meek and gentle prophet, although, as Mendieta remarks with some sarcasm, when they came to know them and to experience their works, they thought otherwise."

There is another tradition pertaining to the departure of Quetzalcoatl, in substance as follows: While Quetzalcoatl was at Tula he was visited by one of the gods disguised as a magician, one who plays an incredible part in their traditions, who leaves heaven to live in and scourge the world. In the course of the conversation Quetzalcoatl was told by the pretended magician that he must go to Tlapalla, and that the thing was inevitable because there was an old man waiting for him at his destination. Quetzalcoatl agreed to go, and drank some fluid offered by the magician, which created within him a desire to start on this journey, and which made him immortal. When Father Bernardino de Sahagun was in the city of Xuchimilco, the natives asked him where Tlapalla was. Sahagun, never having heard of the place replied, he did not know. (Sahagun remarks that the natives often questioned the Christians to see if they knew anything of their antiquities.) Tlapalla is considered as being mythical among historians. Huemac, an enemy of Quetzalcoatl, pursued the latter to the sea, but he did not find him, so in his great wrath laid waste all the country and made himself lord over it and caused the people to worship him as a god. He did this to blot out the memory of Quetzalcoatl and for the hate he had toward him. Thus runs an established tradition of the unusual and remarkable sojourn and departure of Quetzalcoatl in their land.

Quetzalcoatl is accredited with many virtues and powers, some of them being, the great culture hero, the god of trade, "the great organizer, the founder of cities, the framer of laws, and the teacher of their new calendar;" and by some attributed as being their creator and head of the great and powerful priesthood of the Aztec, Maya and Inca nations.

Historians and ethnologists differ somewhat in their conclusions. It seems that they have had a difficult task determining whether the being was actually a god or a mortal. For a long time past this character has been deified and worshiped, and yet his attributes and life history are so human, comments Sylvanus Griswold

Morley in a government bulletin, that "it is not improbable he may have been an actual historical character, some great lawgiver and organizer, the memory of whose benefactions lingered long after death, and whose personality was eventually deified." "He came from the West," Morley's account of the Maya tradition continues, "and settled at Chichen Itza in the Yucatan where he ruled for many years and built a great temple. Finally, having brought the country out of war and dissension to peace and prosperity, he left by the same way he entered; * * * after his departure he was worshiped as a god." "But he is to return again!" the priests of his priesthood are quoted as saying, and when he did it would be "to punish his enemies, to chastise the wicked, the oppressors and tyrants." Herein lies the reason, as has already been stated, for the success attained by Fernando Cortez in his conquest of this area. When the report came to the Aztec chief that the strange white men had landed on their shores great fear arose, for they supposed their ancient tradition was then to be fulfilled. And so, instead of Chief Montezuma sending his troops against Cortez, he gave him a royal welcome and received him into the magnificent palace.

The tradition was found to be deeply implanted in the minds of these people, and consequently aroused the wonder of all who have come into contact with them and their ancient and mysterious customs and archaeology. It must indeed have been an unusual personality to have left so lasting an impression in their tradition and art. Ethnologists and archaeologists can merely speculate and draw their individual conclusions as to the character. Deciphered pre-Columbian manuscripts are almost non-existent, and so we are left with simply an abundance of vocal tradition, personification, and elaborate ceremony deifying his memory. The proposition is here presented, particularly to Christians: Is it not probable that this is the same God who personally visited the Eastern continent? Bearing in mind that the Master spoke to the Jews saying, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring," etc., let us consider some of the evidences of his advent on the western continent, and the possibility of the Quetzalcoatl tradition having had its origin in him. But first, consider the tradition again; see if this singular personality, the accomplishments and miraculous circumstances surrounding the advent of Quetzalcoatl centuries ago, and during the "golden age" of the Maya, might not well be attributed to the greatest Teacher of all time. It must be assumed that the reader is acquainted with the Book of Mormon, or will take occasion to study the sacred account of the Messiah (III Nephi chapters 11-30 and IV Nephi). After reading how he organized and taught the inhabitants on this continent and that he did bring their

country out of confusion and war to sublime peace and prosperity, such as was never before dreamed of, one can appreciate the probability that this tradition originated in him. Some have drawn this very conclusion, apparently without reference to the Book of Mormon. Dr. Siguenza endeavors to identify this American deity with the Apostle Thomas, and another makes the connection with St. James. The belief that Christianity was known to the pre-historic Americans is not a new idea.

He is called Quetzalcoatl; *coatl* meaning serpent, as such occupying an important place in their religious life and art. It will be remembered that Moses, in accordance with divine command, used the brazen serpent in the wilderness, that all who looked upon it should be healed from wounds inflicted by poisonous serpents. (Num. 21:5). After that time, it is conceded by most Biblical authorities that the serpent was recognized as a type of the Christ, and in substantiation of their claim quote from John 3:14. (Compare Helaman 8:14 of Book of Mormon), wherein it says, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up." The serpent continued to be an object of idolatrous reverence among the Israelites for many years; in fact, down to the time of Hezekiah. (II Kings 18:4). The Book of Mormon seems to indicate that this symbolism was recognized on this continent. (II Nephi 25:20.) Furthermore, the Book of Mormon indicates that their new calendar did originate with him, for it was from the time of his birth that they commenced anew to count time over here as well as on the eastern continent. (III Nephi 2:8). In my opinion, it is very likely He of whom these Indian descendants speak as their great culture hero who left, and would some day return.

Lucian Biart in his book on the Aztecs says: "It is an uncontested fact that Quetzalcoatl created a new religion, based on fasting, penitence and virtue. He certainly belonged to a race other than the one he civilized; but what was his country? He died, announcing that he would return at the head of white-faced men; and we have seen that the Indians believed his prophecy fulfilled when the Spaniards landed on their shores." If the "Dark Ages" of the history of our western continent were filled in, the great priesthood in which is vested the power of the Aztec, Maya and Inca nations would perhaps be accounted for as tradition has it, in this great organizer; also a multitude of legends, traditions, and ceremonials pertaining to a virgin birth, the coming of the gods, as well as their ordinances of baptism and sacrament, the use of the cross, and the noble esteem with which they regard the principle of sacrifice, which topics can only be mentioned here. It was these

rites and ceremonies that made many of the early Spanish priests believe that Christianity had been taught them long ago. For they were utterly astonished at seeing these almost Christian ordinances and ceremonies carried out; also very suggestive doctrines pertaining to the trinity and incarnation.

The Spanish writer DeRoo, in his *History of America Before Columbus*, tells of Father Chrestien Leclercq's astonishment when he came among the natives along the Holy Cross River. "The ancient worship of these savages," he says, "and their religious use of the cross would somehow make us believe that these people have in former ages received the knowledge of the Gospel and of Christianity, which they must have lost through the negligence and licentiousness of their forefathers."

The advent of Christ was the crowning event to which ancient prophets pointed, and the episode wherein Christianity had its beginning. If this religion is the "power of God unto salvation" unto all men, should it not have been known to the admittedly advanced civilization of pre-historic America? If so, Christ would of necessity be known, and some tradition relating to the "greatest of men," such as is had in the super-human Quetzalcoatl, might well be looked for.

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PARABLE OF THE RHONE

Erstwhile, beside the placid river Rhone,
 Paused I and pondered as I stood alone,
 And marveled at the beauty of the scene.
 The massive stream flows on its great course,
 So wide and deep, yet noiseless in its glee,
 Still rushes mad like with tremendous force,
 As on it wends its way towards the sea.
 From this majestic memory, oft I scan
 The field of effort shown in human skill.
 See how true merit in the life of man
 Runs broad and deep, to execute his will,
 How, like a river, man in varied poise,
 The greater be the life, the less the noise.