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A New Witness for God: Chapter IV

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Abstract: This article discusses the experiences of the Catholic priests who accompanied Cortez on his expedition to the Americas and conquest of the Aztecs. They discovered the Native American traditions and myths to be similar to their own traditions and rites of worship.

 THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS' MILLENNIAL STAR.

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 A NEW WITNESS FOR GOD.

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CHAPTER IV.

Mythology is a muddy, troubled pool; which, like a mirror shattered into a thousand fragments, reflects while it distorts into fantastic shapes the objects on its banks.

Notwithstanding the greater part of the mythology of heathen nations is absurd and unreliable, lacking both consistency and order, still, mixed up with the rubbish of human invention and childish fable, there are many great truths to be found therein. They may at times be difficult to trace, but their existence is none the less real. And it is not difficult to see reflected in said mythologies the principal incidents of Bible cosmogony and history, and likewise more or less distinct traces of the doctrine of the atonement.

Indeed some unbelievers in the inspiration of the Bible have considered the coincidences between Christian theology and heathen mythology so marked as to put forth the theory that the Christian scheme of man's redemption is derived from what are supposed to be those older mythologies of heathen nations. The facts are, however, that the scheme of man's redemption, as brought about by the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, has been known from the earliest ages; and instead of the Gospel being derived from heathen mythology, it will be found, on more careful investigation, that it was from the Gospel as understood by the patriarchs in the earliest ages, and in the days of Noah, that mythology obtained those ideas which, though distorted beyond measure, bear some analogy to the teachings of the Gospel.

The mythology and traditions of no other nation are so rich in these analogies to Bible cosmogony, historical incidents and Gospel scheme of redemption, as Peru and Mexico. So distinct and clearly defined are these analogies, that the Catholic priests who accompanied Cortez in his expedition to Mexico, looked upon the whole as the delusion of the Devil, who counterfeited the rites of Christianity, and the traditions of the chosen people (the Jews), that he might allure his wretched victims to their own destruction.*

Humboldt says:

The cosmogony of the Mexicans; their traditions of the mother of mankind, fallen from her state of happiness and innocence; the idea of a great

* Prescott, *Con. of Mex.*—Appendix, p. 465.

inundation, in which a single family escaped on a raft; the history of a pyramidal edifice raised by the pride of men, and destroyed by the anger of the gods; the ceremonies of absolution practiced at the birth of children; those idols made with the flour of kneaded maize, and distributed in morsels to the people assembled in the temples; the confession of sins made by the penitents; those religious associations, similar to our convents, of men and women; the universal belief, that white men with long beards and sanctity of manners, had changed the religion and political systems of nations;—all these circumstances had led the priests who had accompanied the Spanish army [into Mexico] at the time of the conquest [under Cortez] to the belief, that at some very distant epoch Christianity had been preached in the new continent. Some learned Mexicans have imagined that the Apostle St. Thomas was the mysterious personage, high priest of Tula whom the Cholulans acknowledged under the name of Quetzal-coatl.—*Travels in America*, vol. I, p. 196-7.

Having adduced the high authority of Humboldt respecting the existence of these remarkable coincidences between Mexican mythology and the leading incidents of Bible history, I think it best to give some few statements in which those analogies are pointed out by another high authority—W. H. Prescott, the author of the Conquest of Mexico and Peru. He says:

Another point of coincidence is found in the goddess Cioacoatl 'our lady and mother;' 'the first goddess who brought forth,' 'who bequeathed the sufferings of child-birth to women, as the tribute of death;' 'by whom sin came into the world.' Such was the remarkable language applied by the Aztecs to this venerated deity. She was usually represented with a serpent near her; and her name signified the 'serpent woman.' In this we find much to remind us of the mother of the human family, the Eve of the Hebrew and Syrian nations.—*Conquest of Mexico* (Appendix) p. 464.

No tradition has been more widely spread among nations than that of a Deluge. . . . It was the received notion under some form or other, of the most civilized people in the Old World, and of the barbarians of the New. The Aztecs combined with this some particular circumstances of a more arbitrary character, resembling the accounts of the east. They believed that two persons survived the Deluge, a man named Coxcox and his wife. Their heads are represented in ancient painting, together with a boat floating on the waters at the foot of a mountain. A dove is also depicted, with a hieroglyphical emblem of language in his mouth, which he is distributing to the children of Coxcox, who were born dumb. The neighboring people of Michoacan, inhabiting the same high plains of the Andes, had a still further tradition, that the boat in which Tegpi, their Noah, escaped, was filled with various kinds of animals and birds. After some time, a vulture was sent out from it, but remained feeding on the dead bodies of the giants which had been left on the earth, as the waters subsided. The little humming bird, *huitzitzilin*, was then sent forth, and returned with a twig in his mouth. The coincidence of both these accounts with the Hebrew and Chaldean narratives is obvious.—*Ibid*, p. 463-4.

On the way from Vera Cruz and the capital (Mexico), not far from the modern city of Pueblo, stands the venerable relic . . . called the temple of Cholula. . . . The popular tradition of the natives is, that it was erected by a family of giants, who had escaped the great inundation, and designed to raise the building to the clouds; but the gods offended with their presumption, sent fires from heaven on the pyramid, and compelled them to abandon the attempt. The partial coincidence of this legend with the Hebrew account of the Tower of Babel, received also by other nations of the East, cannot be denied.—*Ibid*, p. 644.

But none of the deities of the country suggested such astonishing analogies with Scripture as Quetzalcoatl. . . . He was the white man, wearing a

long beard, who came from the east; and who after presiding over the golden age of Anahuac, disappeared as mysteriously as he had come, on the great Atlantic ocean. As he promised to return at some future day, his reappearance was looked for with confidence by each succeeding generation. There is little in these circumstances to remind one of Christianity. But the curious antiquaries of Mexico found out, that to this God were to be referred the institution of ecclesiastical communities, reminding one of the monastic societies of the Old World; that of the rite of confession and penance; and the knowledge even of the great doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation! One party, with pious industry, accumulated proofs to establish his identity with the Apostle St. Thomas; while another with less scrupulous faith saw, in his anticipated advent to regenerate the nation, the type demiveiled of the Messiah!—*Ibid*, p. 464.

This mysterious personage, Quetzalcoatl, was said to have been tall in stature, with a white skin, long dark hair and a flowing beard. The Mexicans looked confidently forward to the return of this person, this kind deity, and it was that tradition, deeply imbedded in their hearts, that made it possible for the Spanish under Cortez to succeed in their remarkable but disgraceful conquest of that country, for the Mexicans thought they recognized in Cortez and his followers the descendants of Quetzalcoatl. "We know by our books," said the Emperor Montezuma in the first interview he held with Cortez, "that myself and those who inhabit this country are not natives, but strangers who came from a great distance. We know, also, that the chief who led our ancestors hither returned, for a certain time, to his primitive country, and thence came back to seek those who were here established, who after awhile returned again, alone. We always believed that his descendants would one day come to take possession of this country. Since you arrive from that region where the *sun rises*, I cannot doubt but that the king who sends you is our natural master.*

The surprise of the Catholic priests who accompanied the expedition of Cortez was unbounded when everywhere they met with rites and ceremonies and symbols that reminded them of their own faith. The author we have already quoted so liberally says on this point:

They could not suppress their wonder, as they beheld the cross, the sacred emblem of their own faith, raised as an object of worship in the temples of Anahuac. They met with it in various places; and an image of a cross may be seen at this day, sculptured in bas-relief on the walls of one of the buildings of Palenque, while a figure bearing some resemblance to that of a child is held up to it, as if in adoration. Their surprise was heightened, when they witnessed a religious rite which reminded them of the Christian communion. On these occasions, an image of the tutelary deity of the Aztecs was made of flour of maize mixed with blood, and, after consecration by the priests, was distributed among the people, who, as they ate it, 'showed signs of humiliation and sorrow, declaring it was the flesh of the deity.' How could the Roman Catholic fail to recognize the awful ceremony of the Eucharist? With the same feelings they witnessed another ceremony, that of the Aztec baptism. The Jewish and Christian schemes were strangely mingled together, and the brains of the good fathers were still further bewildered by the mixture of heathenish abominations, which were so closely intertwined with the most orthodox observances. In their perplexity they looked on the whole as the delusion of the Devil, who counterfeited the rites of Christianity and the traditions of the chosen people, that he might

* Norman's Rambles in Yucatan.

allure his wretched victims to their own destruction.—*Con. of Mex.*, Appendix., p. 465.

I shall trouble you with but two more quotations. They are significant in view of what I shall have to state in a subsequent chapter, and for this reason your attention is especially called to their examination:

In contemplating the religious system of the Aztecs, one is struck with its apparent incongruity, as if some portion of it had emanated from a comparatively refined people, open to gentle influences, while the rest breathes a spirit of unmitigated ferocity. *It naturally suggests the idea of two distinct sources*, and authorizes the belief that the Aztecs had inherited from their predecessors a milder faith, on which was afterwards engrafted their own mythology. The latter soon became dominant, and gave its dark coloring to the creeds of the conquered nations—which the Mexicans, like the Romans, seem willingly to have incorporated into their own—until the same funereal superstition settled over the furthest borders of Anahuac.—*Con. of Mex.*, lib. 1, p. 18.

The other is in relation to their ideas respecting the future state of man; and with it I close this chapter.

They imagined three separate states of existence in the future life. The wicked, comprehending the greater part of mankind, were to expiate their sins in a place of everlasting darkness. Another class, with no other merit than that of having died of certain diseases, capriciously selected, were to enjoy a negative existence of indolent contentment. The highest place was reserved, as in most warlike nations, for the heroes who fell in battle, or in sacrifice. They passed at once into the presence of the sun, whom they accompanied with songs and choral dances in his bright progress through the heavens. . . . Such was the heaven of the Aztecs; more refined in its character than that of the more polished pagan, whose elysium reflected only the martial sports or sensual gratifications of this life. In the destiny they assigned to the wicked we discern similar traces of refinement; since the absence of all physical torture forms a striking contrast to the schemes of suffering so ingeniously devised by the fancies of the most enlightened nations. In all this, so contrary to the natural suggestions of the ferocious AZTEC, we see the evidences of a higher civilization inherited from their predecessors in the land.—*Con. of Mex.*, lib. 1, p. 20. R.

WE deeply regret to have to record the demise of one of Zion's noblemen. The following telegram received from President Wilford Woodruff, Salt Lake City, will be read with sorrow by all Israel: "Erastus Snow died evening twenty seventh this city." Full particulars will be given hereafter.

WE are pleased to learn that the company of emigrating Saints who left Liverpool per Guion S.S. *Wyoming* on the 19th ult., had arrived in New York, and left there at 3 p.m. on Wednesday the 30th ult.

WE are indebted to Utah's Delegate to Congress, Hon. John T. Caine, for pamphlets containing arguments favoring the admission of Utah as a State, made before the Committee on Territories of the United States Senate, and replies of Hon. F. S. Richards to statements in opposition, etc. These documents furnish much valuable information relating to this question.

RELEASES AND APPOINTMENTS.—Elder D. K. Greene is released from the Manchester Conference, and appointed to labor in the London Conference.