

A Survey of Pre-1830 Historical Sources Relating to the Book of Mormon

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The Book of Mormon contains an interesting historical and religious record covering the period from before 2,000 B.C. to 400 A.D. Internal reconstruction of Book of Mormon geography shows that the specific events mentioned in the book probably took place in those parts of Mexico and Guatemala known as Mesoamerica;¹ it was also in Mesoamerica that many of the great ancient American civilizations once flourished. Records were kept by the people of those civilizations, in addition to the book translated by Joseph Smith, and certain of the Prophet's detractors claim that he had access to those records and "was familiar with the advanced state of the native civilizations in Central and South America as well as the relics of the early inhabitants of western New York because of the many books available on these topics,"² further asserting that the Book of Mormon is simply a fanciful rewriting of already available material. The question having been raised, it is instructive to look at what substantial, authentic information on pre-400 A.D. Mesoamerican history was available in western New York in 1829.

One of the greatest early Mexican historians was an Indian noble, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl. He knew the Indian legends and had many painted books (codices) which served as a mnemonic aid in preserving that oral tradition. Trained in Spanish by Catholic priests and aided by the most reliable natives he could find, he attempted to compile the history of Mexico from its beginnings to the Spanish Conquest.³

1. Jesse N. Washburn and Jesse A. Washburn, *An Approach to the Study of Book of Mormon Geography* (Provo, Utah: New Era Publishing, 1939). See also more recent unpublished papers by John L. Sorenson and V. Garth Norman which give specific correlations of Book of Mormon geography.

2. Hal Hougey, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Concord, Calif.: Pacific Publishing, n.d.), pp. 8-9.

3. There are so many apparent correspondences between the early eras of this history and the Book of Mormon account, that an entire book has been

Copies of the original manuscripts were available to early Mexican historians. The first publication, however, was Lord Kingsborough's very expensive 1831 London edition.⁴ As late as 1839 the book was still unavailable to American scholars. Another more accessible edition has been published in Spanish since that time.⁵

Siquenza y Góngora (1645–1700) is practically a forgotten figure among Mexican historians, despite his great efforts to preserve Mexican history. He spent a fortune collecting manuscripts and ancient codices including those of Ixtlilxóchitl. He wrote a great deal of ancient Mexican history, including the preaching of the life God, Quetzalcóatl. When he died, however, his manuscripts were lost by his heirs before being published.⁶ The historian Mariano Veytia says, "At his death it seems as if a surprise attack upon his papers had been sounded and everyone got possession of what he could."⁷ A few years later no trace could be found of his Quetzalcóatl manuscript, reportedly titled "Fénix del Occidente."

Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci (1702–1750) was an Italian nobleman who spent eight years in Mexico. His friendship with the Indians allowed him to gather a large collection of codices and other materials, but because he took up a public collection for a coronation ceremony for the Lady of Guadalupe without permission of the Council of the Indies, the clerics impounded his museum and put him in jail. Later, he was put on a ship bound for Spain and was fortunate to arrive alive because the ship was captured by British pirates. In about 1746 he was given permission to publish, but was never given access to his own materials during the writing of the book. Any references to the writings of Ixtlilxóchitl which had been in his library, had to come from memory. His book has many errors and has not attracted much attention. It is quite rare now, and apparently has not been reprinted in Spanish or translated into English.⁸

devoted to their documentation. See Milton R. Hunter and T. S. Ferguson, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon* (Oakland, Calif.: Kolob Book, 1950).

4. Edward King, viscount Kingsborough, *Antiquities of Mexico* (London: James Moyes, 1831–48).

5. Alfredo Chavero, ed., *Obras Históricas de Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl* (Mexico: Oficina de la Secretaria de Fomento, 1891).

6. Irving A. Leonard, *Don Carlos de Siquenza y Góngora* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1929).

7. Marino Veytia, *Historia Antigua de México* (Mexico: Juan Ojeda, 1836), p. 190.

8. Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci, *Idea de Una Nueva Historia General de la América Septentrional* (Madrid: Juan de Zuñiga, 1746).

Francisco Javier Clavijero (1731–1787) was the most successful of the early Mexican historians in terms of publication. He was born in Veracruz, Mexico, and as a Catholic monk learned Nahuatl, Otomi, and Mixteca, the native Mexican languages. He had early access to the library of Sigüenza y Góngora, so was well acquainted with the manuscript of Ixtlilxóchitl. He went Italy in 1767 and did his writing in Bologna. His works were translated from Spanish for publication in Italian, and comprise the first comprehensive history of Mexico. It has subsequently been printed in many editions. Of primary interest are the English editions. These were printed in London in 1887, in Richmond, Virginia in 1806, and in Philadelphia in 1817.⁹ The book mentions an eclipse in 34 A.D., but aside from that Clavijero chose to ignore the period covered by the Book of Mormon, preferring instead to concentrate on descriptions of flora, fauna, customs, and later history, even though he had information on the early history available to him.

One of the most important histories of Mexico was written by Mariano Veytia. Born in Puebla, Mexico in 1720, he passed the bar exam at the age of seventeen and was sent to Spain, where he successfully settled some business matters in the king's courts. During his stay in Spain he made fast friends with Boturini, who gave him considerable instruction in American history. After serving as mayor of Oña for three years, he decided to travel through Europe visiting royal courts. In all these travels he spent time studying ancient artifacts and history. After his parents died, he returned to Puebla and served as the primary confidant in America of the King of Spain. By virtue of his personal prestige and influence, he had access to practically any manuscript on any subject available in Mexico. His most important acquisition was the museum of Boturini which contained the writings of Ixtlilxóchitl in manuscript form, as well as many codices, old maps, and other antiquities. Some of these have been lost since that time. Although Clavijero and Veytia wrote at about the same time, they apparently never met, and unfortunately were never able to compare notes.

Veytia chose, in contrast to Clavijero, to give substantial emphasis to the earliest period of Mexican history. He relied heavily on the manuscript of Ixtlilxóchitl, correcting errors made by Ixtlilxóchitl in converting Aztec dates to their Christian equivalents, and used many other primary sources, some of which have since been lost or destroyed.

9. Francisco Javier Clavijero, *Ancient History of Mexico* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1817).

Some correspondences between the history of Veytia and the Book of Mormon include notice of a universal flood, the sun standing still for a full day, calamities during the time of the Jaredites, a calendar change, journeys across seas, an eclipse, great earthquakes in 34 A.D., and the appearance of a white, bearded god shortly thereafter. After the death of Veytia in 1788, his manuscript was ignored for over thirty-two years. In 1820 a man named Ortega decided to publish it, but unnamed difficulties prevented his doing so until 1836.¹⁰ It was not republished until 1944.¹¹

Returning for a moment to the time of the earliest historians, we should mention Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1500–1590). One of the truly great chroniclers of Mexico, his works are a monument to a lifetime devoted to study of the natives he was called to teach. He was born in Spain, studied at the University of Salamanca, and came to Mexico in 1529. Wherever he went, he found the most learned natives—those who knew Nahuatl, Spanish, and Latin—and worked with them on documentation of their history, culture, and general ethnography, often matching codices with oral traditions. Two codices which were preserved in this way were the Codex Matritense and Florentine Codex.

Sahagún's work was reviewed by fellow priests, but although they considered it excellent, they decided that it was contrary to the vows of poverty for him to hire scribes to copy it—notwithstanding the fact that he was growing old and his hands shook so much he couldn't do it himself. One of his superiors scattered portions of his only copy around the province, but a friend gathered them up and returned them in about 1573. In 1575 a higher authority gave Sahagún the needed assistance and a copy was made. But in 1578 an inquisitional body, the Council of the Indies, heard that Sahagún had preserved idolatrous Nahuatl traditions, so they ordered him to hand over all the copies of his book to be burned. He apparently had a copy hidden, however, because in 1585 he reconstructed his work. After his death the manuscript lay hidden until its first publication in Spanish in 1830.¹² The first English edition, comprising only four of the twelve books, was published in 1932.¹³ The text of

10. Veytia, *Historia Antigua*.

11. Mariano Veytia, *Historia Antigua de México* (Mexico D. F.: Editorial Leyenda S.A., 1944).

12. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, Bustamente ed. (Mexico: A. Valdes, 1829–30).

13. Bernardino de Sahagún, *A History of Ancient Mexico*, trans. F. P. Bandler (Nashville: Fisk University Press, 1932).

the Florentine Codex has since been translated from the Aztec directly into English.¹⁴

The Spanish priest, Juan de Torquemada (1557–1624), was one of the few chroniclers to see his history printed, a history which merits our attention because it mentions over water crossings by different groups of settlers. Torquemada's work was maligned because it presented the unpopular view of Indians as people of culture rather than as savages. Thus it was practically ignored until this century. The first edition,¹⁵ published in 1615, suffered an immediate scarcity when a ship carrying most of the copies sank. At the beginning of the eighteenth century only three copies could be found in Spain. Another copy has since been found in Mexico and I have examined a first edition copy in the Newberry Library, Chicago. There was a second edition published in Madrid in 1723 which also became a very rare book.¹⁶ The only reprintings have been in this century, and it has never been published in English.

Alexander Humboldt was a man of prestige and wealth who traveled through Mexico writing about the physical characteristics of the countryside. He made maps, measured altitudes, and compiled ethnographic data. Learning the ancient history was for him incidental, but he did describe the Mexican pyramids at Cholula in some detail, and did mention that some forms of theocratic government were known in South America. He was acquainted with the codices because he saw the remnants of the Boturini collection. His book was published in English in New York in 1811. Concerning the history he says,

The Toultecs appeared first in the year 648 A.D. . . . [They] introduced the cultivation of maize and cotton; they built cities, made roads, and constructed those great pyramids which are yet admired, and of which the faces are very accurately laid out. They knew the use of hieroglyphic painting; they could cast metals, and cut the hardest stones. And they had a solar year more perfect than that of the Greeks and Romans.¹⁷

14. Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, Florentine Codex, translated from the Aztec into English by J. O. Anderson and C. E. Dibble (Santa Fe: Monographs of the School of American Research, 1952).

15. Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, 3 vols. (Madrid: Sevilla M. Clavijo, 1615).

16. Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana* (Madrid: Rodriquez Franco, 1723).

17. Alexander von Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, translated from the French by John Black (New York: Riley, 1811), p. 183.

This was the earliest history mentioned by Humboldt, but it does not even begin until more than two centuries after Book of Mormon history ends.

The other significant aspect of Humboldt's book is his reference to Quetzalcóatl, the serpent god, whom he dates to the period following the appearance of the Toltecs. Mormon writers have linked Quetzalcóatl with Jesus Christ partly because of references in the Book of Mormon to the use of a serpent as a symbol for the Savior (2 Nephi 25:20; Helaman 8:13–15). If Humboldt was correct in placing Quetzalcóatl late in Mexican history, then how can the Book of Mormon references (and even biblical, viz. Numbers 21:5–9 and John 3:14) connecting Christ with serpent symbols be reconciled? Modern research has shown that there were at least two historical figures called Quetzalcóatl, and Humboldt was referring to the one who lived last.¹⁸

The visit of Jesus Christ to America is the central event in the Book of Mormon. However, historical documents available prior to 1830 did not speak of this visit at all. Had the lost work of Siqüenza y Gongóra or the writings of Ixtlilxóchitl been available, the situation would have been different. Even if Joseph Smith had seen Humboldt's book or quotations from it, he would have had no evidence of anything bearing on a visitation by Christ. Nevertheless, it is interesting that modern research gives credence to that event.

18. The first was the life god whom archaeological evidence has shown to have been worshipped since very ancient times in Mesoamerica. He was an historical figure who transformed himself into a god by achieving perfection. Represented by the serpent symbol, in anthropomorphic representations he is recognized by the cross cut of a sea shell on his chest (see César A. Saenz, *Quetzalcóatl* [Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1962], pp. 20–28), which symbolized his primary teaching that man must be spiritually reborn (see David A. Palmer, "A Study of Mesoamerican Religious Symbolism," *S. E. H. A. Newsletter*, no. 103 [1967]).

Various priests who pretended adherence to the religion of Quetzalcóatl called themselves by his name. The most famous of these was Ce Acatl Topíltzin Quetzalcóatl. Born in Michatlauco, Mexico about 843 A.D., he learned the cult of the feathered serpent and later became king-priest of Tula, the Toltec capital in the state of Hidalgo. According to tradition, he was later expelled because of moral turpitude (see Laurette Sejourné, *El Universo de Quetzalcóatl* [Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1962], pp. 1–50). It appears that he took his retinue to the Yucatan peninsula, where he introduced many elements of Toltec culture and religion. There, the serpent was worshipped by the name of Kukulcán.

John L. Stephens, who discovered the Mayan ruins in 1839, lamented the dearth of written histories which were needed to understand the cities he had uncovered. He said,

Throughout the country the convents are rich in manuscripts and documents written by the early fathers, caciques, and Indians, who very soon acquired the knowledge of Spanish and the art of writing. These have never been examined with the slightest reference to the subject; and I cannot help thinking that some precious memorial is now mouldering in the library of a neighboring convent, which would determine the history of some one of these ruined cities. . . .¹⁹

What led to Stephens' frustration was the fact that all the aforementioned studies were unavailable, even to a man of his stature. Furthermore, Mayan history came close to never being available as a result of the burning of native records by the Spanish priests. However, after the inquisitorial spirit subsided, there were a number of documents written by natives in their own languages in European script, which were discovered in later years. None of these was published prior to 1830. Practically all of these documents are of interest to Book of Mormon students because of references to the creation, to sacred globes (Liahona?), and to migrations across the sea. There is also an extensive treatment of religious customs.

The *Pópol Vuh* was first published in Spanish in 1857 and in English in 1950.²⁰ *Memorial de Sololá* and *Título de los Señores de Totonicapán* were published in 1885, and *Papel del Origen de los Señores* in 1950.²¹ There are also a number of the so-called Books of *Chilam Balam*,²² the first of which was published in 1882. The writings of Gaspar Antonio Chi have only recently been translated and published,²³ and the works

19. John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1841), 2:456.

20. *Pópol Vuh, The Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya*, trans. Delia Goetz and Sylvanus Morley from Spanish translation by Adrian Recinos (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950).

21. Adrian Recinos, trans. and ed., *Memorial de Sololá, Anales de los Cakchiqueles, Título de los Señores de Totonicapán* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963).

22. Alfredo B. Vásquez and Silvia Rendón, *El Libro de los Libros de Chilam Balam* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963).

23. M. Wells Jakeman, trans., *The Historical Recollections of Gaspar Antonio Chi* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Department of Archaeology, 1952).

of the chronicler Diego de Landa (1524–1579) were first published in French in 1864 and in English in 1937.²⁴

Although there were a number of romances and other less than reliable books about the natives of North America available in the pre-1830 United States, North America appears to have no connection with the area described in the Book of Mormon account. The only authoritative sources available on Mesoamerica, where Book of Mormon history apparently evolved, were Clavijero's *Ancient History of Mexico* and Humboldt's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*. Neither deals significantly or at length with the pre-400 A.D. period. The year 1830 was a turning point in Mesoamerican scholarship, however, as it saw the publication of the Book of Mormon in English, and the works of Sahagún in Spanish. Shortly thereafter Veytia's *Historia Antigua*, Stephens' report of his explorations of Mayan ruins, and the writings of Ixtlilxóchitl were published.

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24. Diego de Landa, *Yucatan Before and After the Conquest*, trans. William Gates (Baltimore: The Maya Society, 1937).