

# Viracocha

## Christ among the Ancient Peruvians?

Scott Hoyt

*There came from a southern direction a white man of great stature, who, by his aspect and presence, called forth great veneration and obedience. This man who thus appeared had great power, insomuch that he could change plains into mountains, and great hills into valleys, and make water flow out of stones. As soon as such power was beheld, the people called him the Maker of created things, the Prince of all things, Father of the Sun. For they say that he performed other wonders, giving life to men and animals, so that by his hand marvellous great benefits were conferred on the people. . . . In many places he gave orders to men how they should live, and he spoke lovingly to them . . . admonishing them that they should do good . . . and that they should be loving and charitable to all. In most parts he is generally called Ticiviracocha. . . . [And] that wherever [he] . . . came and there were sick, he healed them, and where there were blind he gave them sight by only uttering words.<sup>1</sup>*

—Pedro de Cieza de León, Catholic Historian, 1550

Viracocha was the principal deity of ancient Peru, and according to the *cronistas* (Catholic historians, mostly priests, arriving in Peru

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1. Pedro de Cieza de León, *The Second Part of the Chronicle of Peru (El Senorio de los Incas)*, trans. and ed. Clements R. Markham (1874; London: Hakluyt Society, 1883; repr. Boston: Elibron Classics, 1999), 5–6. *Senorio* was originally handwritten in 1550. Citations are to the 1999 edition.

## Scott Hoyt

I became interested in the correlation between the ancient legends of Peru and the Book of Mormon, while serving my mission in Peru in 1972–74. One of my companions, Kirk Magleby, and I became friends with a professor at San Marcos University, the oldest university in the Americas. He obtained access for us to the university vault holding original manuscripts of the *cronistas*, the Spanish/Catholic historians who wrote in the 1500s and



1600s about, among other things, the religion, customs, and legends of the Incas and Pre-Incas. We had the rare opportunity to leaf through these and note legends with certain intriguing parallels to Book of Mormon accounts of Christ's visit to ancient America.

Kirk and I authored a paper while on our missions about these parallels, and we both continued to study and pursue these legends after our missions. I authored several other papers on the ancient God of Peru, Viracocha, and other similarities in the legends to Christ and Christian beliefs and rituals, including several written in the course of my Latin American studies major at California State University, Fullerton. I received my bachelor's degree in this major.

I went on to obtain my juris doctorate and made a career at a large national law firm. Even while in a demanding legal career and helping my wife, Gaylene, raise our six children, I never lost my passion for the legends and ethnohistory of ancient Peru and their potential support of the Book of Mormon. I continued to study and lecture on the subject.

I returned twice to Peru after my mission to continue my studies and ultimately pulled together all of my research on Viracocha and wrote this article. I have materials on other aspects of the Book of Mormon reflected in the legends, religion, and customs of the Incas and Pre-Incas, which I plan to use to write further articles.

shortly after Francisco Pizarro and the conquistadors in the 1500s) he was called the “creating God of the Andes.”<sup>2</sup>

The *cronistas* learned of and wrote about Viracocha based on oral accounts they received from the Incas and their study of Inca customs and practices still extant at the time of the conquest of Peru. They also saw and described several statuary representations of Viracocha that were worshipped by the Incas and their ancestors.

Significantly, many characteristics and actions of Viracocha reported by the Incas and documented by the *cronistas* in the 1500s match those attributed to Jesus Christ in Mormon scripture, including the Book of Mormon’s account of Jesus Christ’s visit to the Americas following his resurrection in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> This article does not contend that the events

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2. Although the Incas also worshipped the sun, according to the *cronistas* they did so because the sun was created by Viracocha and was associated with him. Cieza says he was “the Father of the Sun” (see epigraph) and Cristóbal de Molina says he “gave being to the Sun.” Cieza, *Chronicle*, xxvi, 5; Cristóbal de Molina, *Account of the Fables and Rites of the Incas* (written in 1573), ed. and trans. Brian S. Bauer, Vania Smith-Oka, and Gabriel E. Cantarutti (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 23, 45. Molina’s manuscript sat in Madrid until it was first published by Clements Markham in 1873. See appendix to Molina, *Account of Fables and Rites*, 91.

William Prescott, noted historian who wrote *History of the Conquest of Peru*, concluded that although heavenly bodies such as the sun were worshipped, “the Peruvians, like so many other of the Indian races, acknowledged a Supreme Being, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, whom they adored under the different names of Pachacamac and Viracocha.” William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Peru*, 2 vols. (1847; Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1874), 1:93, 95. He states the Incas “had attained to the sublime conception of one Great Spirit, the Creator of the Universe, who, immaterial in his own nature, was not to be dishonored by an attempt at visible representation, and who, pervading all space, was not to be circumscribed within the walls of a temple.” Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Peru*, 1:88.

Padre Blas Valera, who was the son of a native Peruvian woman and a Spanish father and was the first mestizo priest in Peru, writing in 1592 (his manuscript was lost and little known until the late 1900s), stated the ancient Peruvians believed Viracocha created the sun. Sabine Hyland, *The Jesuit and the Incas: The Extraordinary Life of Padre Blas Valera*, S. J. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 2, 4, 157.

3. The crowning event described in the Book of Mormon is the visit of Jesus Christ to inhabitants of the American continent after his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. As this article will demonstrate, remarkable similarities exist between the version of Christ’s ministry in the Americas as recorded in the Book

in the Book of Mormon took place in Peru. Rather, its premise is that Christ may have visited the ancient Peruvians, as he did other people in other locations.

Given the general similarities between the *cronistas'* Viracocha and Jesus Christ as described in the Book of Mormon, some might wonder if Mormonism's founder, Joseph Smith, somehow gained access to the *cronistas'* accounts and used their descriptions of ancient Inca legends in producing the Book of Mormon. This would have been unlikely if not impossible, however, because the *cronistas'* writings generally were not published until well after the Book of Mormon was published in 1830.<sup>4</sup> At the time Joseph Smith was translating the Book of Mormon in Pennsylvania and New York, the *cronistas'* writings were securely ensconced in Catholic archives in Spain.

Some have dismissed the *cronistas* as writers who "catholicized" their accounts, ascribing Christlike attributes to Viracocha because of their personal religious beliefs. Although this criticism might apply to some of the more enthusiastic writings of later *cronistas*, one of Peru's foremost twentieth-century experts on the *cronistas* who documented those legends, Franklin Pease,<sup>5</sup> concludes that four of the earliest *cronistas*, Pedro de Cieza

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of Mormon and the Catholic *cronistas'* accounts of the ministry of the ancient Peruvian deity Viracocha. Another striking similarity that will not be explored fully in this paper is the claim by some Incas, based on reports by several *cronistas*, that their ancestors came from Israel and that they shared many customs with the Jews and Hebrews. See, for example, Joseph [José] de Acosta, *The Natural and Moral History of the Indies* (written in 1590), trans. Edward Grimston, vol. 2 (1604; London: The Hakluyt Society, 1880), 69. Acosta was a Spaniard who joined the Jesuits and went to Lima in 1569. He traveled extensively in Peru with the viceroy-governor and from his travels wrote a detailed description of the Inca customs and history.

4. See, for example, Franklin Pease G. Y., *Las Crónicas y los Andes*, 2d ed. (Lima: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010), 19, 204, 206, 233 n. 483, and 324 n. 737. See also Gordon F. McEwan, *The Incas: New Perspectives* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 10–11 ("Many of the original manuscripts were not published until modern times").

5. Until his death in 1999, Pease was the most recognized expert in the world on the accounts of the *cronistas* and ancient Peruvian ethnohistory. See Ascención Martínez Riaza, "Franklin Pease García-Yrigoyen (1939–1999). In memoriam," *Revista Complutense de Historia de América* 26 (2000): 373–76. He lectured and wrote extensively on the accounts of the *cronistas* and served as university professor and director of Peru's National Museum of History. See also McEwan, *Incas*, 12, listing Pease among those who have made major contributions to Inca studies.

de León (“Cieza”),<sup>6</sup> Cristóbal de Molina (“Molina”),<sup>7</sup> Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa (“Sarmiento”),<sup>8</sup> and Juan Diez de Betanzos (“Betanzos”),<sup>9</sup> documented the beliefs, traditions, and customs of the Incas and their ancestors as they heard and witnessed them with relative accuracy and without significant Catholic embellishment. These four chronicles, according to Pease, “appear to be the least contaminated (with European elements) of the writings of the time. It is necessary to call attention to the fact that the versions of Andean myths that we have in our possession are always of an only relative accuracy, for the Spaniards that wrote them had serious difficulties—cultural and linguistic—in transcribing oral versions existing at the moment of the European invasion.”<sup>10</sup> Pease concludes with this

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6. Cieza arrived in Peru in 1548. He traveled throughout the Andes and fought as a soldier in postconquest Spanish civil wars and “he is regarded as an honest and careful observer who distinguished between fact and opinion.” McEwan, *Incas*, 10.

In his translation of Cieza’s *Chronicle*, Markham states in his notes: “Cieza de Leon is certainly one of the most important authorities on Ynca history . . . whether we consider his peculiar advantages in collecting information, or his character as a conscientious historian.” Cieza, *Chronicle*, xxvi. See also Paul Richard Steele and Catherine J. Allen, *Handbook of Inca Mythology* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 42–43; and Pease, *Crónicas*, 38–40.

7. Molina was a Spaniard who arrived in Cuzco in the mid-1500s, learned the native language—Quechua—and then, at the request of Viceroy Francisco de Toledo, proceeded to interview the Incas and their descendants about their customs and beliefs, also serving as a priest to them. See Steele and Allen, *Handbook*, 42–43; and Pease, *Crónicas*, 52–53.

8. Sarmiento was a celebrated navigator and captain who, on the orders of the Viceroy of Toledo who governed Peru from 1569 to 1581, interviewed the Incas in Cuzco and completed a history of the Incas in 1572. This history is considered quite accurate by scholars. See McEwan, *Incas*, 10–11; Steele and Allen, *Handbook*, 42–45; and Pease, *Crónicas*, 38–40.

9. Betanzos “was considered in his day to be the finest interpreter into Spanish of the Inca language called Quechua. He married an Inca princess who was the former wife of both the last independent Inca ruler, Atahualpa, and the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro. Because of his wife, Betanzos had remarkable access to the Inca viewpoint of the pre-Conquest history.” He wrote a treatise on the Inca Empire. McEwan, *Incas*, 10–11. See also Steele and Allen, *Handbook*, 42–43; and Pease, *Crónicas*, 38–40.

10. Franklin Pease, “The Andean Creator God,” *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 17, no. 3 (Dec. 1970): 162. See also Franklin Pease G. Y., *El Dios Creador Andino* (Lima: Mosca Azul Editores, 1973), 12–13; and Pease, *Crónicas*, 155–56. After the conquest, the Incas and their descendants

caveat: “We will then always have to depend on the unreliable information of the chroniclers and try to reach, through them and oral texts, the understanding of the cosmogonic myth and the image of the deity as a step towards later studying the religious life of the central Andes.”<sup>11</sup> In offering this caution, Pease joins other scholars who question the accuracy of these sixteenth-century sources. It should be noted, additionally, that these Catholic chroniclers tended to regard the Inca legends as fiction and often attributed any similarity between the ancient Peruvian religion and Catholicism as deceptions produced by the devil.<sup>12</sup> What this means is that these early chroniclers, rather than catholicizing the Incan myths, may have simply avoided recording some similarities because they found them offensive. Therefore, while recognizing the limitations in even these four more reliable accounts, we can still readily concede that the

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began to intermingle their beliefs with Catholic beliefs. The Spanish priests did not discourage this, since it made it easier for them to “convert” the Incas. As an example, the Cathedral of Cuzco was built on the foundation of the Inca Temple of Coricancha, making it more likely the Incas would attend mass.

11. Pease, “Andean Creator God,” 175.

12. Pease, *Crónicas*, 69, 137 (“The goal of the priests became to remove the ‘idolatry’ and to extinguish the Andean cults and replace them with the infusion of Christianity.” “[F]or the Spanish they [Incas] did not have Gods but rather idols, demonic manifestations”). See also Luis E. Valcárcel, *Ruta Cultural del Perú* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1945), 166 (“All that wasn’t Catholic was idolatry and heresy”); and Hyland, *Jesuit and the Incas*, 65 (“In the effort to eradicate native beliefs, . . . all religious forms from the pre-Christian past were left out of the Quechua catechism . . . [as] too morally corrupt to have a place in a Christian culture”).

Harold Osborne has written: “We depend for our knowledge of myth and legend, even in this systematically distorted form, entirely on the records of the chroniclers who wrote during the early decades after the Conquest. . . . Some were genuinely eager to find out what the Indians themselves believed about their origins and took the trouble to question Indian authorities and record what they said. . . . Others had a less partial interest. But all were hampered by a rigid belief in the literal truth of biblical records and a horror of anything which conflicted with Christian dogma. As we have said, owing to this reason a great deal of mythological and legendary material which we should have valued today was contemptuously passed by in silence as trivial or immoral. Again and again our sources stop short just at the point where we should have found the continuation of most interest. The following passage from Sarmiento is typical. . . . ‘As the devil, who is always striving to injure the human race, found these unfortunates to be easy of belief and timid in obedience, he introduced many illusions, lies and frauds.’” Harold Osborne, *South American Mythology* (Feltham, Middlesex, UK: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1968), 34–35.

similarities between Viracocha and Jesus Christ that did survive are striking in many regards.

There are a number of other *cronistas* who, although important, do not receive even the qualified acclaim for accuracy and for unembellished accounts given to the above-described four. Some of these less-reliable chroniclers will be cited herein, but the reader should keep the above-mentioned caution in mind. Pease was not alone in concluding the four primary *cronistas* were the most credible. Other Peruvian experts and scholars come to the same conclusion. For example, María Luisa Rivara de Tuesta, professor emerita of the prestigious National University at San Marcos in Peru, writing on “the creation myth” of ancient Peru, including the legend of Viracocha, relies almost entirely on these same *cronistas* as the most recognized and authoritative.<sup>13</sup>

Pease and Luis E. Valcárcel, a founding father of ancient Peruvian archeology and ethnohistory who founded and directed the Anthropological Museum of Cuzco and who at one point was director emeritus of all of Peru’s natural museums, support their conclusion that these *cronistas* did not catholicize their accounts by demonstrating that many of the key attributes of Viracocha documented by these four were foreign to their own Catholic preconceptions of Christ. For example, Pease notes that the *cronistas* do not represent Viracocha as creating the world from nothing (*ex nihilo*) as Catholics then believed God did. Rather, Viracocha created by organizing already-existent matter.<sup>14</sup>

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13. María Luisa Rivara de Tuesta, *Pensamiento prehispánico y filosofía colonial en el Perú*, Filosofía e historia de las ideas en Latinoamérica, volume 3 (Lima: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000), 98–132. See also McEwan, *Incas*, 10–11.

14. Pease, *Dios Creador Andino*, 13–14; Franklin Pease G. Y., “Notas Sobre Viracocha y Sus Itinerarios,” *Histórica* 10 (December 1986): 227 (“European authors in that epoch [1500s] only understood a creation *ex nihilo*”); Valcárcel, *Ruta Cultural del Perú*, 168–70. It should be noted that the Inca belief in creation was not similar to the Greek idea of creation out of already-existing primeval matter known as chaos that provided a backdrop against which the Judeo-Christian doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation arose. In Betanzos’s account, for instance, Viracocha created “some people from stone as a kind of model of those that he would produce later” and painted them as they should appear when called to life. He then had two helpers go through the land and call the various peoples forth. “Just the way I have painted them and made them of stone,” Viracocha instructed his helpers, “thus they must come out of the springs and rivers and caves and mountains in the provinces which I have told you and named.” By contrast, however, Betanzos’s description of the creation of sky, sun, moon, stars, and earth does not specify either a creation out of existing material or a

Comparisons show that the *cronistas*' descriptions of Viracocha differ in key respects from their Catholic conceptions of Christ, which is evidence they were not consistently or purposely infusing Viracocha with Christlike characteristics. As noted, however, the Catholic *cronistas*' accounts show significant overlap with the Mormon understanding of Christ, suggesting that legends concerning Viracocha (and his Aztec counterpart, Quetzalcoatl, as well as the white Mayan God, Kukulcan) might have some connection to the Christ spoken of in the Book of Mormon. Indeed, Valcárcel wrote that when the *cronistas* and priests learned of the ancient God of Peru, they did not understand the Incas' philosophical religious conception.<sup>15</sup>

Further evidence that not all *cronistas* catholicized their accounts of the Viracocha legends is found in their attempts to distance their "true" Catholic beliefs from the "false" Inca religious beliefs. In fact, the *cronistas* supported their Catholic colleagues in proselytizing the "pagan" Peruvians to Christianity, including the destruction of their Viracocha statues and the conversion of a Viracochan temple in central Cuzco into a Catholic chapel and convent (the Church and Convent of Santo Domingo, see page 132).

### **BOOK OF MORMON DESCRIPTIONS OF CHRIST'S LIFE AND MISSION ARE REFLECTED IN ANCIENT PERUVIAN LEGENDS**

In addition to discussing the Book of Mormon's descriptions of Christ's visit and their parallels in ancient Peruvian legends, this article will also explore the similarities between the legends and Book of Mormon

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creation out of nothing. He merely says that Viracocha "suddenly made the sun and the day . . . , he made the stars and the moon," and "he created the sky and the earth." Juan de Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, trans. and ed. Roland Hamilton and Dana Buchanan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 7–8. The other *cronistas* gave similarly indefinite accounts. Perhaps recognizing the ambiguity in these earliest sources, Pease suggests a third possibility, creation *ex deo*: "The Andean deity creates from himself, by his word." Pease, "Andean Creator God," 169. It is not surprising that these Inca creation myths do not fit comfortably within the Greek or Catholic conceptions of creation, since these people were unaware of the Old World philosophical and theological debates that eventually resulted in current Christian dogma. In this regard, the ancient Peruvian legends are more reminiscent of Book of Mormon statements about the Creation, which likewise do not specify a creation either out of chaos or out of nothing, other than saying that man is created out of the dust of the earth (see Mosiah 2:25), which may be nothing more than a metaphorical statement, although it does suggest a creation out of *something* rather than nothing.

15. Valcárcel, *Ruta Cultural del Perú*, 166.



accounts of Christ's pre-earth role as Creator, his role as sustainer of all life, his resurrection, and prophecies of his coming to earth.

### The Visits of Christ and Viracocha

Echoes of Christ's appearance as related in the Book of Mormon can be found in accounts of Viracocha's visit that were handed down through generations of ancient Peruvians before finally being recorded by the Catholic *cronistas* in the 1500s. For example, according to the Book of Mormon, the visit of Christ to this continent was preceded by great destructions through earthquake, fires, landslides, tempests, falling mountains, rising plains, and cities swallowed by earth and water, all followed by three days of thick darkness (3 Ne. 8:5–23). Before Christ appeared, he announced from the heavens that certain cities had been destroyed: "Waters have I caused to come up in the stead thereof, . . . [others] have I caused to be sunk, and made hills and valleys in places thereof; and the inhabitants thereof have I buried up in the depths of the earth, to hide their wickedness" (3 Ne. 9:7–8).

Cieza said the Incas recounted how their ancestors

were a long time without seeing the sun, and that, suffering much evil from its absence, great prayers and vows were offered up to their gods, imploring for the light they needed. Things being in this state, the sun, shining very brightly, came forth from the island of Titicaca, . . . at which every one rejoiced. Presently, afterwards, they say, that there came from a southern direction a white man of great stature, who . . . had great power, insomuch that he could change plains into mountains, and great hills into valleys, and make water flow out of stones. As soon as such power was beheld, the people called him the Maker of created things, the Prince of all things, Father of the Sun.<sup>16</sup>

Given the belief that this "Maker of created things" had power to change the face of the land, it is not surprising that the ancient Peruvians' "chief god Viracocha was closely associated with both mountains and water."<sup>17</sup>

The full name of Viracocha, "Con Tici Viracocha," has significance relative to the destruction described in the Book of Mormon prior to the Savior's visit. Valcárcel stated that *Kon* was a form of *Kam* and the root of several words signifying "noise and thunder," "fire," and "God of

16. Cieza, *Chronicle*, 5.

17. Johan Reinhard, "Interpreting the Nazca Lines," in *The Ancient Americas: Art from Sacred Landscapes*, ed. Robert Townsend (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1992), 291–301.

earthquakes.”<sup>18</sup> And Pease notes that Kon “is the personification of earthquake that manifests in the tremors with the eruption of volcanoes.”<sup>19</sup>

In the Book of Mormon account of Christ’s appearance in 3 Nephi 10:9, we learn that it was morning when the three days of darkness ended, presaging the eventual appearance of Jesus Christ in the Americas. Cieza reports that “the sun, shining very brightly, came forth,” prior to the appearance of the powerful white man they called Ticiviracocha, as described above.<sup>20</sup>

In the account in 3 Nephi, the people “cast their eyes up again towards heaven; and behold, they saw a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe.” The man “stretched forth his hand and spake . . . , saying: Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world. . . . Arise and come forth . . . that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet” (3 Ne. 11:8–10, 14). Similarly, the *cronistas* reported accounts of the visit of this bearded white man wearing a body-length tunic, often white in color. This description was in stark contrast to the usual appearance of the Incas, who wore short skirts, had dark skin, and had little if any facial hair. They also recount that this was Viracocha, who took upon himself a human form to visit those on earth—a “white man” they called “Maker of created things, the Prince of all things.”<sup>21</sup>

Following is a series of quotes extracted from the *cronistas’* accounts of the appearance of Viracocha in Peru:

Viracocha was represented as a tall, well built man, wearing a beard, . . . dressed in a tunic that came down to his feet.<sup>22</sup>

All agree that Viracocha was the Creator of these people. They have the tradition that he was a man of medium height, white and dressed in a white robe like an alb secured round the waist, and that he carried a staff

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18. Luis E. Valcárcel, “Kon, Pachacamac, Uirakocha” (thesis, Universidad del Cusco, 1912), 9, available at <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=inu.32000.000860132;view=1up;seq=3>.

19. Pease, *Dios Creador Andino*, 18 n. 14.

20. Cieza, *Chronicle*, 5–6.

21. Cieza, *Chronicle*, 5.

22. Garcilaso de la Vega, *The Royal Commentaries of the Incas* (written in 1609), trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Orion Press, 1961), book 5, p. 137. Garcilaso was the son of a Spanish Conquistador who married an Incan noblewoman. As a result, he fraternized with Incan nobility and priests and wrote what many consider to be a somewhat idealistic history of the Incas.

and a book in his hands. . . . [He] went on his road and came to a place where many men of his creation had congregated.<sup>23</sup>

[Viracocha,] a man with long robe and marks in his hands, preached to them.<sup>24</sup>

He was a tall man dressed in a white garment that reached to his ankles and was belted at the waist. His hair was short and he had a tonsure like a priest. . . . They said his name was Contiti Viracocha Pacha-yachacic, which means “God, maker of the world” in their language.<sup>25</sup>

Viracocha . . . made them [men] . . . of his stature which was, as they say, average height of men, and being made he gave them life.<sup>26</sup>

The most detailed account of Viracocha’s appearance, which comports closely with the Book of Mormon, was provided by Cieza and is set out at the beginning of this article.<sup>27</sup>

The Book of Mormon relates that Christ, like Viracocha, appeared to a large group of people. “All the multitude, with one accord, did go forth with their sick and their afflicted, and their lame, and with their blind, and with their dumb, . . . and he did heal them every one. . . . And he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them. . . . And when he had done this he wept” (3 Ne. 17:9, 21, 22). As Christ wept when he was moved by the tears of his people, Viracocha is depicted in various statues and drawings showing tears running down his cheeks. Indeed, one of Viracocha’s names was “The Weeping God,” with the earliest known depiction of him crying placed prominently on the Sun Gate in the ancient city of Tiahuanaco, the place from which Viracocha embarked upon his ministry.<sup>28</sup> An interesting local legend recovered by Gary Urton in the vicinity of Cerro Blanco, considered the highest sand dune in the

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23. Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, *History of the Incas*, trans. and ed. Clements Markham (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1907), 35, available at <https://archive.org/details/ocmo6996956.2159.emory.edu>. Sarmiento took sworn testimony from all leading Inca descendants, and for this reason, his account is “the most authentic and reliable that has yet appeared.” Introduction, in Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, ix–xii. Although Sarmiento wrote his *History* in 1572, his manuscript remained in a library unprinted or published until 1906. Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, xi.

24. Calancha, *Crónica moralizada*, 333.

25. Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, 10.

26. Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, 38.

27. Cieza, *Chronicle*, 5–6.

28. See the images on pp. 127 and 130. The image on page 127 shows a staff consisting partially of a two-headed serpent in his left hand.

world (2,078 meters), ties the weeping of Viracocha to the weeping of the people:

In ancient times, before there were aqueducts in the valley, a great drought occurred and the people had no water for years. The people began to cry out to their god, Viracocha or Con. . . . The people went en masse to the foot of Cerro Blanco. . . . At that moment, Viracocha/Con descended from the sky to the summit of the mountain and heard the weeping of his people. He was so moved by their cries that he began weeping and tears flowed from his eyes. The tears ran down Cerro Blanco, penetrated the earth, and these tears were the origin of the aqueducts.<sup>29</sup>

Kathy Doore indicates that “Tici Viracocha was worshipped as god of the sun wearing rays for a crown, with thunderbolts in his hands, and tears descending from his eyes; he is remembered for his teachings, and wept for his people.”<sup>30</sup> Gene Savoy, another noted archaeologist studying ancient Peruvian culture, described a statue of the Moche culture of the northern coast of Peru as having “crying eyes that reflect strong characteristics of Quetzalcoatl [the great white God of the Aztecs].”<sup>31</sup>

According to the Book of Mormon, one of the first things Christ did after arriving in the Americas was to call disciples to help him minister to the needs of the people. Sarmiento’s account refers to Viracocha sending forth disciples: “He ordered his two servants [to go forth] . . . naming the tribes and ordering them all to go forth and people the country. His servants, obeying the command of Viracocha, set out on their journey and work.”<sup>32</sup>

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29. Gary Urton, report of fieldwork in Nazca, Peru, unpublished manuscript in possession of Helaine Silverman; quoted in Helaine Silverman and Donald A. Proulx, *The Nazca* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 208.

30. Kathy Doore, “Toro Muerto Rock Carvings: Crying Viracocha’s [sic]: Ancient Engravings from a Lost Culture,” *Labyrinthina.com*, describing the stone carvings, [http://www.labyrinthina.com/toro\\_muerto/tm\\_index.htm](http://www.labyrinthina.com/toro_muerto/tm_index.htm).

31. Gene Savoy, “El Misterioso Dios de la Barba Florida,” *Caretas* (January 20–30, 1966): 26–29.

32. Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, 34. In Sarmiento’s retelling of this fable, there were actually three servants, who alone survived the great flood that Viracocha caused to come and destroy the people he had created. One of the three servants disobeyed him, so he was tied “hands and feet” and launched “in a *balsa* on the lake.” After threatening vengeance, “he was carried by the water down the drain of the same lake, and was not seen again for a long time.” Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, 32–33. In Betanzos’s account, there was no flood,

Also, according to the Book of Mormon, Christ performed many miracles, issued his commandments, and taught the people to live peaceably one with another. In the Viracocha legends, we read:

Viracocha continued his journey, working his miracles and instructing his created beings. . . . Intending to leave the land of Peru, he made a speech to those he had created, apprising them of the things that would happen.<sup>33</sup>

For they say that he performed other wonders, giving life to men and animals, so that by his hand marvellous great benefits were conferred on the people. . . . In many places he gave orders to men how they should live and, he spoke lovingly to them and with much gentleness, admonishing them that they should do good, and no evil or injury one to another, and that they should be loving and charitable to all. In most parts he is generally called *Ticiviracocha*.<sup>34</sup>

Viracocha ordered these people that they should live without quarrelling, and that they should know and serve him. He gave them a certain precept which they were to observe on pain of being confounded if they should break it.<sup>35</sup>

Wherever [he] . . . came and there were sick, he healed them, and where there were blind gave them sight by only uttering words. Through acts so good and useful he was much beloved by all.<sup>36</sup>

Other accounts from the *cronistas* intimate that the Incas had an understanding of Viracocha's relationship with God the Father. For example:

The Creator . . . ordered that the eldest of his sons, called Ymaymana Viracocha, [which means] "in whose power and hands all things are found," should . . . visit . . . all the land . . . teaching the people. . . . [The Creator's sons] descended . . . to the lowermost [part] of the land. From there they ascended to the heavens.<sup>37</sup>

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and the two servants were not called from among the people but came with Viracocha, along with others; however, only these two were sent out to call the people into existence "out of the springs and rivers and caves and mountains." Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, 8.

33. Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, 36.

34. Cieza, *Chronicle*, 5–6.

35. Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, 29.

36. Cieza, *Chronicle*, 6.

37. Molina, *Account of Fables and Rites*, 10. This aspect of his visit—that he descended to visit them, then ascended—also was known to the Mayas and

They kissed his feet . . . calling him Tunum . . . Lord, the son of the Creator.<sup>38</sup>

As he ended his visit, Christ told the people, “I must go unto my Father,” and “he departed from them, and ascended into heaven” (3 Ne. 18:27, 39), but he promised to return in glory at his Second Coming (3 Ne. 26:3). Viracocha also promised to return to the Peruvians. Sarmiento relates, “When this [the arrival of the Spaniards] became known to Atahualpa he rejoiced greatly, believing it to be the Viracocha coming, as he had promised when he departed.”<sup>39</sup>

The similarities between Jesus Christ and Viracocha as described by the *cronistas* are compelling enough that a number of the lesser *cronistas* and later non-Mormon scholars of the history of Peru concluded it is possible that one of Christ’s Apostles or Christ himself came to Peru and that Christ and Viracocha might be the same person. Sabine Hyland explained, “Viracocha [is described] in no uncertain terms as a Christ-like being who represents the incarnation of God as man. Viracocha is described as ‘God [i.e. Pachacamac] in human figure.’”<sup>40</sup> According to Franklin Pease, “The Wiraqocha of Cuzco is presented in a human form

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is depicted above the temple doorway in Tulum, Mexico, which shows a God figure half-pointing up and half-pointing down.

38. Calancha, *Crónica moralizada*, 334.

39. Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, 152. Because of this belief, the Incas came to refer to the Spaniards as viracochas, but Atahualpa’s initial misconception was quickly corrected, when one of his people, Ciquinchara, who had spent time among the Spaniards, returned to report to Atahualpa. He informed the emperor that the invaders were really devils and thieves who “appropriate everything, leaving nothing.” Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, 248. This news saddened Atahualpa. Still, he was curious to meet the strangers and didn’t fear for his safety since he had a force of 80,000 warriors with him. He obviously underestimated the greed of the conquerors and had little understanding of Spanish weaponry or the devastation a small cavalry could cause, or he certainly would have refused to meet Pizarro under the conditions that led to an ambush, a massacre, and Atahualpa’s capture and eventual execution. His outright rejection of the proffered Bible (or breviary, in some accounts) as a token of the Spaniards’ religion suggests that Atahualpa did not consider these visitors to be gods or representatives sent from Viracocha when he met them in a royal audience unarmed and lightly guarded in the city of Cajamarca. See, for instance, Christopher Minster, “The Capture of Inca Atahualpa,” *About.com*, <http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/theconquestofperu/p/The-Capture-Of-Inca-Atahualpa.htm>.

40. Hyland, *Jesuit and the Incas*, 144–45; bracketed text in original.

(some chroniclers even suppose an identification between an apostle of Christ who would have arrived in America and the both peaceful and terrible image of the, occasionally bearded, old man with a staff or rod).<sup>41</sup> And Valcárcel states, “There is a tradition they saw the Apostle Thomas or Bartholomew.”<sup>42</sup>

Other *cronistas* concluded that Viracocha was not merely an Apostle of Christ, but rather that he was Christ. According to the *cronista* Padre Blas Valera, Viracocha “was God incarnate. . . . Viracocha was Christ.”<sup>43</sup> Another Jesuit priest, Father Pedro Deillanes Sanservo, who studied the Incan quipus-knot system for recording and remembering important events and details, described “Viracocha in no uncertain terms as a Christlike being who represents the incarnation of God as man.”<sup>44</sup>

Cieza mentions some “Spaniards” who postulated that Viracocha was “one of the glorious apostles who, in the days of his preaching, had passed this way.” Cieza himself, however, was not convinced and insisted instead that the Incas had not heard “the word of the Holy Gospel” before the arrival of the Spanish.<sup>45</sup>

### Viracocha’s Pre-Earth Life—the Creator

The ancient Peruvians believed Viracocha existed before the earth and that he created it. Sarmiento reports: “The natives of this land affirm that in the beginning, and before this world was created, there was a being called Viracocha. He created a dark world without sun, moon or stars. Owing to this creation he was named Viracocha Pachayachachi, which means ‘Creator of all things.’ . . . Viracocha . . . ordered that the sun, moon and stars should come forth, and be set in the heavens to give light to the world, and it was so.”<sup>46</sup> Based on his study of the *cronistas*, Pease adds that they talk of a pre-earth creation by Viracocha, who initially created the heavens, the earth and a generation of men. He was the creator who conquered chaos and ordered the preexistent world; he commanded the

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41. Pease, “Andean Creator God,” 164.

42. Luis E. Valcárcel, “Kon, Pachacamac, Uirakocha: Contribución al estudio de las religiones del antiguo Perú,” *Revista Universitaria* 1, no. 1 (Julio de 1912): 50, available at [http://revistau.unsaac.edu.pe/Revista/pdfs/REVISTA\\_1\\_.pdf](http://revistau.unsaac.edu.pe/Revista/pdfs/REVISTA_1_.pdf).

43. Hyland, *Jesuit and the Incas*, 145.

44. Hyland, *Jesuit and the Incas*, 144.

45. Cieza, *Chronicle*, 7–8.

46. Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, 28, 33.

heavens, the sun, the moon and stars to divide space and he organized the four regions.<sup>47</sup>

According to Betanzos,

In ancient times, . . . the provinces of Peru were dark and neither light nor daylight existed. In this time, there lived certain people. . . . During this time of total night, they say that a lord emerged from a lake in this land of Peru . . . and that his name was Contiti Viracocha. They say that he brought with him a certain number of people. . . . When he and his people arrived there, they say that he suddenly made the sun and the day and ordered the sun to follow the course that it follows. Then, they say, he made the stars and the moon. They say that this Contiti Viracocha had emerged another time before that one, and that on that first occasion he created the sky and the earth but left everything in darkness. Then he made those people who lived in the time of darkness.<sup>48</sup>

These people displeased him, so he turned them into stone. “In that very moment, he made the sun and the day and the moon and stars.” He then formed stone models of another people and painted them. “After he had finished making them, he ordered all those he had there with him to depart, leaving only two in his company. He instructed those who were left to look at the stone likenesses, and he told them the names he had given to each kind of people.” His two helpers then went out, “calling and bringing out the people from the caves, rivers and springs, and high sierras.”<sup>49</sup>

According to Pease, “The creation was of a character of ordering a stratification of matter that already existed in one manner or other, a construction with matter already there. The creator of the universe is he who puts in order, who dominates chaos. The formation or ordering pre-supposes a creator and fundamental matter.”<sup>50</sup> Again, Pease draws

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47. See Pease, “Notas,” 227; Pease, *Dios Creador Andino*, 84 n. 21.

48. Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, 7.

49. Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, 7–9. The Mayan *Popul Vuh* refers to three creating gods and states that they held counsel and decided to create the heavens, earth, and man. *Popul Vuh* (written in 1550), trans. Miguel Angel Asturias and José María Gonzalez de Mendoza (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1973), 12–15.

50. Pease, *Dios Creador Andino*, 84 n. 21, citing Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Fenomenología de la Religión* (Mexico, FCE, 1964), 550–51. This accords with the Mayan understanding of the nature of the Creation as written in the *Popul Vuh*, where it calls the three creating gods the “Dominators,” “Constructors,”



upon the *cronistas*' accounts of Viracocha's creation for his conclusion that they describe Viracocha as a creating God who used stone to make men, who also made the sun, moon, and stars.<sup>51</sup> Valcárcel likewise notes that the *cronistas* described a God who made, organized, and named men, plants, animals, sun, moon, and stars.<sup>52</sup>

From accounts such as Betanzos's, Pease states, "In the Andes, the word is creator. Viracocha creates by means of the word."<sup>53</sup> And another *cronista*, Francisco de Ávila, reported that Viracocha "was the creator of all things, and that with only commanding it and saying it . . . terraces arose . . . and irrigation channels were formed."<sup>54</sup>

These accounts of Viracocha as creator of all things through his words are similar to descriptions of Christ found in the Book of Mormon and other modern Mormon scripture. For example, in Ether 3:14, Christ declares: "I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people." In Mosiah 3:9, Christ is called "the Creator of all things from the beginning" (see also 2 Ne. 2:14), and in 3 Nephi 9:15, Christ proclaims, "I was with the Father from the beginning."

The ordering and commanding of existing elements by the word and voice of God are fundamental to the words found in Helaman 12:8–17, where the hills and mountains, the foundations of the earth, the waters of the great deep, and even the sun all obey the command and voice of the everlasting God who created humankind and this world.

In the book of Moses, God appears to Moses and tells him, "By the word of my power, have I created them, which is mine Only Begotten

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and says that a semblance of ocean and space existed in heaven but nothing had yet been united together. See *Popol Vuh*, 12–15. The *Popol Vuh* has been criticized for being catholicized by the Mayans, who wrote their accounts after the conquest. However, murals of the Creation accounts in the *Popol Vuh*, dating to 200 BC, have been discovered recently in Guatemala. The accounts in the murals conform to the later manuscripts of the *Popol Vuh*. See Ministry of Culture and Sports, "The Painted Murals of San Bartolo," UNESCO, April 27, 2012, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5738/>.

51. See, for example, Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, 7–9; and Valcárcel, *Ruta Cultural del Perú*, 168 ("All that exists comes from the hands of one creator: Apu Kon Titi Wirakocha the supreme maker, namer and organizer [ordenador] of the universe").

52. Valcárcel, *Ruta Cultural del Perú*, 168.

53. Pease, *Dios Creador Andino*, 23, citing Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, 85.

54. Francisco de Ávila, *Dioses y Hombres De Huarochirí* (1608; n.p.: La Fundación el Libro Total, n.d.), 5, available at [http://www.ellibrototal.com/ltotal/?t=1&d=3567\\_3681\\_1\\_1\\_3567](http://www.ellibrototal.com/ltotal/?t=1&d=3567_3681_1_1_3567).

Son” (Moses 1:32). This theme is rooted in biblical creation accounts from the beginning: “and God said . . .” (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29); consonantly, the early Book of Mormon prophet Jacob declares, “For behold, by the power of his word man came upon the face of the earth, which earth was created by the power of his word” (Jacob 4:9).<sup>55</sup>

### Viracocha and Christ as Sustainer of Life

The similarities between LDS scripture and ancient Peruvian legends do not end with the Creation. Although Christ proclaimed himself the light and life of the world in the New Testament (John 1:4 and 8:12), the ancient Peruvians understood this role of Viracocha, and Latter-day Saints understand Christ in this same regard more literally than the Catholic conception held by the *cronistas*.

The *cronistas*’ accounts reported that, after creating the heavens, the earth, and man, Viracocha actually radiated the energy and light that animates, gives vitality to, and sustains the daily life of men, animals, plants, and all things. Cieza says the Peruvians called him “Creator of Heaven and Earth” and he that was “giving life to men and animals.”<sup>56</sup> Blas de Valera said, “Pachacamac and Viracocha come first, followed by the heavenly objects created by God and [these are] adored by the Andeans as secondary objects infused with life and power by the Creator.”<sup>57</sup> According to some sources, another name for Viracocha was “Pachacamac.”<sup>58</sup> “The word Pachacamac is made up from *pacha* (time/

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55. In D&C 93:33, we read that “the elements are eternal,” and in D&C 131:7, Joseph Smith taught, “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter.” This is why Joseph rejected the notion of creation *ex nihilo*. To him, creation was organizing existing matter, not conjuring matter out of nothing.

56. Cieza, *Chronicle*, 5, 94.

57. Hyland, *Jesuit and the Incas*, 146. Sabine Hyland notes that this creator provides “substance” to his creations and that Padre Valera called him “Light Eternal.”

58. Hyland says, “Valera also taught that the Incas maintained a distinction between the first two persons of the Trinity—the creator of the universe (Pachacamac) and his incarnation on earth (Viracocha), who was also fully the creator.” Hyland, *Jesuit and the Incas*, 159. Pease claims that some chroniclers “Christianized” their accounts, observing that “not only Garcilaso, but other chroniclers, attribute to the Incas the knowledge, reached by philosophical reflection, of the ‘real god’ (the Christian one); with that criterion they established an identification between Pachacámac and Wiraqocha.” But he also points out that both names are Quechua words and suggests that “both words could be two different names of the same diety, Wiraqocha in the mountain

space, universe/earth, state of being) and *camac* (creator or animator).<sup>59</sup> “Wirakocha . . . is the life of the world and is in the sun and other celestial bodies . . . the fire, earth and water [who] animated rock . . . [to] create man . . . [is] in all places.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, “they worshipped him as creator of the universe cosmic luminous light in the heavens reflected in the water and in lightning. He is the fertilizer of water and light not only in the heavens but also in sacred rocks and in the blood.”<sup>61</sup> Valcárcel describes Pachacamac as he who “animates” the earth.<sup>62</sup>

After studying the writings of all of the *cronistas*, Pease summarizes: “Viracocha transmits the energy from His very person, which lights the sun.”<sup>63</sup> Sabine Hyland cites Valera as indicating that the Andeans adored the sun, moon, and stars as “objects infused with life and power by the Creator.”<sup>64</sup> Perhaps this comparison is why some have been confused about whether both Viracocha and the sun were gods to the Incas. Acosta, for instance, says, “Next to Viracocha, or their supreme God, that which most commonly they adore is the Sunne; and after that, those things which are most remarkable in the celestiall or elementary nature, as the moone, starres, sea, and land.”<sup>65</sup> Molina stated that Viracocha “gave being to the Sun.” “They did not recognize [the Sun] as the Creator, but as [being] created by the Creator.” The priests prayed that it would give “light and splendor” and “that it can shed light on the people that you created, O Creator.”<sup>66</sup>

In Doctrine and Covenants 88:13, a nearly identical description of Christ’s role as animator and sustainer of the universe is found. Christ’s light is “the light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things,

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region and Pachacámac in the plains of the coast of the Pacific.” Pease, “Andean Creator God,” 168.

59. Steele and Allen, *Handbook*, 45.

60. Valcárcel, *Ruta Cultural del Perú*, 168, 169, 170.

61. Robert Randall, “La Lengua Sagrada: El Juego de Palabras en la Cosmología Andina,” *Lengua, Nación y Mundo Andino: Allpanchis* 19, no. 29/30 (1987): 267–305.

62. Valcárcel, “Kon, Pachacamac, Uiracocha: Contribución al estudio,” 49–55.

63. Pease, *Dios Creador Andino*, 24.

64. Hyland, *Jesuit and the Incas*, 146.

65. Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, 303–4, archaic spelling preserved from Grimston’s translation.

66. Molina, *Account of Fables and Rites*, 23, 45. See also Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia General de las Indias* (1556; Barcelona: Maestras Obras, 1965), 340 (“Pachacamac, creator and illuminator of the world”).

which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God.” The scripture also states that the light of Christ powers the sun and the stars (D&C 88:7–9).

Moreover, in discussing Viracocha’s power and energy as described by the *cronistas*, Pease states that he is “God of the light and creator of the sun. . . . The fire that dances in the sun is the same that moves in the fertilizing power; the energy that is in all elements, fire and water, is one and the same.”<sup>67</sup> Molina quotes a prayer in which the Peruvians called Viracocha “You who give being to everything. You who enable men to eat and drink in this world.”<sup>68</sup> Citing *cronistas* Balboa and Acosta, Prescott states that Pachacamac signifies “He who sustains or gives life to the universe.”<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, in Ether 4:12, Christ is described as “the light, and the life, and the truth of the world.” Moroni 7:16 states that every man is given “the Spirit of Christ.” And in 3 Nephi 9:18, Christ states, “I am the light and the life of the world. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.”

### Resurrection—Life after Death

The *cronistas* were intrigued to find that, in addition to sharing a seemingly Christian view of repentance and forgiveness, the ancient Peruvians believed in a resurrection and afterlife. Molina wrote, for instance,

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67. Pease, *Dios Creador Andino*, 24. See also Steele and Allen, *Handbook*, 24 (“In the Andean world, an animating or vital force is assumed to infuse all material things”).

68. Molina, *Account of Fables and Rites*, 44–45.

69. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Peru*, 1:93, citing Balboa, *Historia del Peru*, cap. 6; and Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, 141. Although there is some debate among Peruvian scholars about whether Viracocha and Pachacamac were the same god, both were generally described as principal deities and creators. And many *cronistas*, ethnohistorians, and Peruvian scholars support Garcilaso’s conclusion that they were the same god to the ancient Peruvians. See, for example, Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, 256 (“most of them acknowledge and confess a supreme Lord and Maker of all, whom the Peruvians called Viracocha, adding a very excellent name such as Pachacamac or Pachayachacic, which means the creator of heaven and earth”); Hyland, *Jesuit and the Incas*, 144 (“Viracocha is described as God [i.e. Pachacamac] in human figure”); Prescott, *Conquest of Peru*, 93 (“The Peruvians . . . acknowledged a Supreme Being, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, whom they adored under the different names of Pachacamac and Viracocha”); and Valcárcel, “Kon, Pachacamac, Uirakocha” (thesis), 4–6.

“They believed, and were very sure, that the souls did not die and that those of good [people] went to rest with the Creator. . . . Those who went to heaven would eat and drink with great splendor the very fine foods that the Creator had arranged for them.”<sup>70</sup> Prescott reported, “They admitted the existence of the soul hereafter, and connected with this a belief in the resurrection of the body. . . . This belief in the resurrection of the body . . . led them to preserve the body with so much solicitude.”<sup>71</sup> Without doubt, the doctrine of the resurrection of the mortal body and its eternal reunion with the spirit is strongly taught in the Book of Mormon and in the Doctrine and Covenants (for example, 2 Ne. 9:13; Alma 11:43–45; 40:21–23; D&C 88:27–28).

### Prophecies and Symbolism of Viracocha before His Visit

The Book of Mormon contains many prophecies of Christ’s visit and symbolism associated with him, just as legends claim the ancient Peruvians were well aware of and worshipped Viracocha long before he visited them in person.

Some scholars claim that every ancient Peruvian culture, including those before AD 30—Chavín (approximately 1200–300 BC); Huari (approximately 200 BC–AD 400); Paracas (approximately 800–100 BC); and Tiahuanaco (approximately 300 BC–AD 300)—worshipped Viracocha and had the same or similar graphic representations of him on their pottery, textiles, stone carvings, and temples.<sup>72</sup> All later cultures also worshipped him and depicted him in their art and architecture, including Pachacamac (approximately AD 200–600); Moche (approximately AD 100–800); Nazca (approximately AD 400–650); Chimú (approximately AD 900–1450); and the Incas (approximately AD 1400–1500). Each of these civilizations left images of the “staff deity.” Whether this deity initially represented Viracocha is uncertain, but in the later periods the staff god is uniformly identified as Viracocha by the experts on

70. Molina, *Account of Fables and Rites*, 67.

71. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Peru*, 91–92.

72. See Claudette Kemper Columbus, “Madre-padre-criatura: el dios andino transcorriente, Wiracocha,” *Anthropolgica* 13, no. 13 (1995): 13. Elsewhere, Columbus attributes to Julio Tello and unnamed others the belief that representations of Viracocha date back to the Chavín period (“if Julio Tello among others is correct in supposing one of their [Chavín] deities represents Wiracocha”). Claudette Kemper Columbus, “Human Discourse about Nature; Nature’s Processes as Discourse: The Pre-Columbian Peruvian Myth of Cavillaca,” <http://www.iupui.edu/~arisbe/menu/library/aboutcsp/columbus/CAVIL.htm>.

ancient Peruvian cultures. Julio Tello, who discovered the Chavín civilization, concluded that the staff god of Chavín and Tiahuanaco was one and the same—Viracocha.<sup>73</sup>

A figure facing forward with outstretched arms holding staffs—is one of the best known Andean iconographic images. This figure was depicted on all sorts of media—stone, textile and ceramic as well as colonial paintings. The tradition can be traced back to Chavín culture with figures holding serpent staffs. . . . It was characteristic of Wari and Tiahuanaco cultures. . . . [It] is also found in Nazca culture. . . . The best known version of the Staff Deity is depicted on the gateway of the sun at Tiahuanaco.<sup>74</sup>

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73. Julio C. Tello, *Introduccion a la Historia Antigua del Peru* (Lima: Editorial Euphorion, 1921), 44–45; Julio C. Tello, “La religión en el antiguo Perú, Wirakocha,” *Revista Inca* 1, no. 1 (1923): 93–320 and no. 3 (1923): 583–606; Luis E. Valcárcel, “Simbolos Magico-Religiosos en la Cultura Andina,” *Revista del Museo Nacional* 28 (1959): 3–18 (the staff god was depicted “from Chavin to post Hispanic times”). John Howland Rowe, in “Form and Meaning in Chavín Art,” Anthropology Emeritus Lecture Series at U.C. Berkeley, <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/ANTH/emeritus/rowe/pub/chavin/>, wonders whether the images of the Chavín “Staff God” were depicting a nature god or a creator god, which casts some doubt on whether Viracocha myths date back to the Chavín period. “In later Andean religion gods who were worshipped so widely were nature gods, all others being of local or regional importance. If, as seems likely, this fundamental *distinction* was an old one in Peru, the Staff God was probably a nature god. His association with eagles and hawks in the temple at Chavin suggests that he was a sky god, but that is as far as our archaeological evidence will take us. Perhaps he was a god of Thunder, like the Inca deity Illapa, who was pictured as a man holding a club in one hand and a sling in the other. There is no reason to think that he was a creator god.” The problem underlying Rowe’s ambivalence is that none of these ancient civilizations had a written language, so all the experts have to go on is the art these people left. It is apparent, though, that the later civilizations drew upon the images left by the older ones. And although some may question whether these earlier images represent Viracocha or some other deity, at least Tello reconciles Rowe’s question by attributing the feline and nature powers of the jaguar god of Chavín to Viracocha, the creating god. He states unequivocally that the jaguar god of Chavin was Viracocha. See Tello, *Introduccion a la Historia Antigua*, 44–45. See also McEwan, *Incas*, 37, 40, describing the figure on the Gate of the Sun at Tiauanaku as the “deity derived from the Chavín staff god.”

74. Valcárcel, “Simbolos Magico-Religiosos,” 3–18; Rowe, “Influence of Chavín Art,” 101–24.

Both Betanzos and Sarmiento mention that Viracocha carried a staff.<sup>75</sup> The images generally show sunrays emanating from his head, and many depict a bearded face. All have a scepter or staff in each hand, said to be emblems of his power and authority as creator of all things.<sup>76</sup> From the various images of Viracocha on the pottery, textiles, metal works, and temples of the ancient Peruvians dating back well before Christ's earthly mission, it is clear that these Peruvians worshipped a staff god and may have associated him with Viracocha.

In a somewhat similar manner, various prophecies of Christ's coming appear in the Book of Mormon, including prophecies by Isaiah that are repeated in the first few books of the Book of Mormon.<sup>77</sup> These prophecies go into detail about his mission to save mankind by atoning for their sins and initiating the universal resurrection of all mankind.

According to the Book of Mormon, Lehi and his group brought brass plates with them that contained the earlier parts of the Old Testament, including texts of Isaiah. In addition to having all of Isaiah's detailed prophecies about Christ and related symbolism in the five books of Moses, Lehi and successive prophets after him received further detailed revelations about Christ and his role as Savior. These included prophecies that Christ would take upon himself the sins of the world and that



The Staff God carved in the Doorway of the Sun in Tiahuanaco, Bolivia. This figure also was depicted in the stone carvings, metalwork, pottery, and textiles of all other ancient Peruvian civilizations from the Chavin to the Incas. Photograph by Dennis Jarvis.

75. Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, 10; Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, 31–32.

76. The image on this page shows a figure from the Tiahuanaco civilization circa AD 500, holding a staff in each hand.

77. It is impossible to draw a perfect parallel here because the ancient Peruvians did not leave a written record like the Book of Mormon. So any speculation that the earliest depictions of the staff god indicate a prophecy that he would come to visit the people is unverifiable.

because of his resurrection all would be resurrected (see, for example, 1 Ne. 10:4–11; Mosiah 13:28, 33–35).

The symbolism of Christ described in the Book of Mormon includes one element that is of particular relevance to the depictions of Viracocha mentioned above: the brass serpent Moses raised up on a staff for those bitten by fiery serpents to look at so that they might be healed, an analogy for all mankind to look to Christ for salvation or healing from their sins (see 2 Ne. 25:20).

Archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence shows that this symbol of a man holding a staff with serpents was widely utilized by the ancient Peruvians to represent Viracocha. Sarmiento noted that Inca Pachacuti (ninth Royal Inca) made two images of gold—one of Viracocha that he placed to the right of the image of the Sun and one of lightning that he placed to the left of the image of the Sun. “This image was most highly venerated of all. Inca Yapanqui adopted this idol for his *guaququi* [idol], because he said it had appeared and spoken in a desert place and had given him a serpent with two heads, to carry about with him always” to protect him.<sup>78</sup> And as discussed and shown in the iconographic image of Viracocha above, he was depicted as the “staff god” holding a two-headed serpent staff, much like ancient Near Eastern depictions of two serpents intertwined around a central pole or the single serpent that Moses raised up as symbolic of Christ (Num. 21:9; John 3:14). According to *The Handbook of Inca Mythology*, the “two-headed subterranean . . . serpent [was] depicted in pre-Columbian art long before the Incas.”<sup>79</sup>

The Incas also practiced a ritual faintly reminiscent of the sacrament instituted by Christ to symbolize his atoning sacrifice to his followers. Prescott describes the Virgins of the Sun making a fine bread of maize flour that was distributed with fermented liquor.<sup>80</sup> Hyland refers to these emblems as “corn beer and a sacred bread.” “The parallels with the Eucharist are obvious,” she concluded, referring to the outward form and not the deeper symbolism of body and blood that Christ invoked.<sup>81</sup> Garcilaso stated, “Because of this . . . certain Spaniards have felt it their duty to affirm that the Incas and their vassals celebrated

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78. Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, 101.

79. See Steele and Allen, *Handbook*, 26. The Aztecs and Mayas symbolized their great white bearded Gods, Quetzalcoatl and Kukulcan, with a feathered serpent.

80. Prescott, *Conquest of Peru*, 111.

81. Hyland, *Jesuit and the Incas*, 168.



Holy Communion as Christians do.”<sup>82</sup> While the Incas apparently did not associate the idea of atonement with either their partaking of sacred emblems or their practice of offering blood sacrifices, some elements of their sacrificial rituals were similar in form to ancient Hebrew practices. Cieza, for instance, related that they offered sacrifices “of lambs, of sheep, of doves . . . , and of other birds and beasts.”<sup>83</sup>

### Statuary Representations of Viracocha

Although textile, pottery, trinket, and some statuary stone representations of Viracocha survived the ravages of the Spanish conquest, the most lifelike statuary representations of him did not. While older, primitive rock statues of Viracocha on the outskirts of the Inca Empire remained untouched, the *cronistas* made reference to a number of other dramatic Viracocha statues in and around Cuzco that, one by one, disappeared or were destroyed.

The destruction or disappearance of these remarkable statues can be attributed to three primary causes:

- Some of the statues were made of solid gold and were either melted down into ingots or otherwise transported to Spain as part of the usurpation of Inca wealth by Spain and its conquistadors.
- Other statues were destroyed by Spanish soldiers on the orders of Catholic priests frustrated by the idolatrous worship of the Incas.
- Still other statues were secreted away by Incas intent on protecting them from the Spaniards.

Garcilaso noted that “the Indians threw a great part of the treasures from the Cuzco temple into . . . [a] lake.”<sup>84</sup>

It is ironic that some Catholic conquistadors initially documented the existence of these statues and described their Christlike attributes only to participate later in their destruction. This can be explained in part by their evolving schemes to Christianize the Inca masses. At first the priests seemed willing, even anxious, to build bridges of understanding between their theology and that of the Incas. Then it seems they decided it would be easier to start from scratch. So it is that the

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82. Garcilaso, *Commentaries*, book 6, p. 183. The Aztecs held a similar ceremony and claimed they were eating the body of their god. See Acosta, *Natural and Moral History*, 415.

83. Cieza, *Chronicle*, 94–95.

84. Garcilaso, *Commentaries*, book 3, p. 81.

selfsame *cronistas* can be found musing that a certain statue of Viracocha has the attributes of an Apostle of Christ, perhaps even Christ himself, only to later excoriate the Incas for worshipping that same demonically inspired image.

The end result is that, although there is some evidence that life-like statues existed and depicted a more obviously Christlike figure, none of these “realistic” statuary is currently available to be examined. But that does not change the enthusiasm with which some *cronistas* reported the existence of many Christlike monuments throughout the Inca Empire. For example, Garcilaso gave these two descriptions:

Viracocha was represented as a tall well-built man, wearing a beard as long as your hand; he was dressed in a tunic that came down to his feet. . . . There was something about this statue that reminded one of the likenesses looked of our holy apostles, and especially of his honor Saint Bartholomew.<sup>85</sup>

When the Spaniards discovered this temple and the statue of Viracocha, they said that Saint Bartholomew had perhaps been in Peru to teach the word of God to the gentiles.<sup>86</sup>

Garcilaso, whose account is not considered as reliable as those of the four primary *cronistas*, gives a rather different perspective than Cieza, who wrote this after viewing a statue of Viracocha:



A statue of the “Weeping God” showing his scepter and tear tracks down his cheeks. Photograph by Scott Hoyt.

85. Garcilaso, *Commentaries*, book 5, pp. 137–38. The oral tradition and legends of the visit of a great white bearded God are similar among the ancient civilizations of North, Central, and South America, but to the author’s knowledge, statues conforming to the descriptions of him in these traditions and legends were found only in Peru.

86. Garcilaso, *Commentaries*, book 5, p. 138.

When I passed through this province, I went to see the idol, for the Spaniards affirm that it may have been some apostle. . . . Whether this or any other was intended for one of the glorious apostles who, in the days of his preaching, had passed this way, God Almighty knows. I know not, and can only believe that if he was an apostle, he would work with the power of God in his preaching to these people, . . . and there would be some vestige of his visit. . . . Hence, I believe that, until our times, the word of the Holy Gospel was not heard.<sup>87</sup>

Obviously, some among the Spanish were seeing a similarity between the image of Viracocha and their own (probably inaccurate) concept of what an Apostle of Jesus might have looked like. But Cieza was more skeptical. Unfortunately, none of these more lifelike statues has survived, so we are left with diverse descriptions and interpretations.

No statue of Viracocha was more prominently displayed or thoroughly described than that which was found in the central temple of Cuzco, the capital of the Inca Empire. The solid gold statue was of a bearded man in flowing tunic and sandals with one arm “raised as if in command.”<sup>88</sup> Molina reported that in Cuzco in the temple of Quishuarancha, dedicated to the god Viracocha, was a “gold statue of the Creator [that was] the size of a ten-year-old boy. It was shaped like a standing man, his right arm raised high, with the hand almost closed, and the thumb and second finger raised, like a person who was ordering.”<sup>89</sup> The natives came to this temple in Cuzco-Coricancha night and day and made offerings on an altar before the gold statue. The temple and golden statue survived for several years before Catholic priests had the building demonished and built on its foundation a Catholic church and convent that stand to this day.

The fate of this oft-described solid-gold statue is a mystery, although legends abound that this golden relic, as well as many others, may have been spirited away by Inca warriors and hidden in the mountains, inside caverns, or at the bottom of lakes. As a 2011 article in *National Geographic* highlighted, at least two nineteenth-century explorers were led by indigenous guides to huge troves of Inca treasures presumably

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87. Cieza, *Chronicle*, 7–8.

88. McEwan, *Incas*, 145.

89. Molina, *Account of Fables and Rites*, 15. See also Bernabé Cobo, *History of the Inca Empire* (written in 1653), trans. Roland Hamilton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 156. Cobo was a Jesuit missionary and writer who lived in Peru sixty-one years and wrote a history composed of his observations during that time.



A picture of the Church and Convent of Santo Domingo showing the stone foundation of the Inca Temple of Coricancha beneath it. Photograph by Scott Hoyt.

hidden from the Spaniards in the 1500s. One of them was an American named Barth Blake, who wrote of beholding “thousands of gold and silver pieces of Inca and pre-Inca handicraft,” including life-size human figures. Blake continued, “I could not remove [all the treasure] alone, nor could thousands of men.” “Taking only what he could carry, Blake left and never returned,” the article continues. “Sources suggest that en route to New York, where he planned to raise funds for an expedition to recover his prize, he disappeared overboard. Some say he was pushed deliberately.”<sup>90</sup>

Another prominent monument to Viracocha survived the Spanish Conquest and is still displayed on a hillside of the Sacred Valley in Ollantaytambo, Peru. The Tunupa/Viracocha monument is a Mount Rushmore-like effigy of the profile of a man staring across the valley toward Macchu Picchu. Although the rock carving has fallen into disrepair, thousands of tourists still visit the site every year.

This rock effigy is best viewed from the heights of the fortress of Ollantaytambo, which was the site of a heroic rebellion against the

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90. James Owen, “Lost Inca Gold—Ransom, Riches and Riddles,” *National Geographic* (April 25, 2011), <http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/archaeology/lost-inca-gold/>.



A picture from the Inca fortress at Ollantaytambo showing the effigy of Viracocha on the cliff at the right-hand side of this image. Photograph by Scott Hoyt.

Spanish by the Inca emperor in exile Manco Inca in the late 1500s. One can almost imagine Manco sitting atop his mountain fortress, staring across the valley at the effigy of Viracocha for inspiration and, if at all possible, a blessing.<sup>91</sup> According to Betanzos, this effigy was carved in the image of Viracocha in memory of his visit.<sup>92</sup> The people also made another rock statue of Viracocha in Urcos outside of Cuzco, where they said Viracocha sat when he visited.<sup>93</sup>

## CONCLUSION

While interpreting ancient myths and images is never an exact science, the foregoing data drawn from accounts of ancient legends and corroborating archaeological depictions suggest that the ancient Peruvians viewed their creator god Viracocha in some ways as Christ is described

91. Kim MacQuarrie, *Last Days of the Incas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 230–50.

92. Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, 7–8. See also William H. Isbell and Anita G. Cook, “Ideological Origin of an Andean Conquest State,” *Archaeology* 40, no. 4 (1987): 27–33.

93. Betanzos, *Narrative of the Incas*, 7–8.

in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and other LDS scripture. Although some of the lesser *cronistas* who reflected on the possible origin of the legends of Viracocha concluded that he either was an Apostle of Christ who came to proselytize or was Christ himself, the four primary chroniclers—Cieza, Betanzos, Sarmiento, and Molina—were more circumspect in their assessment of this possibility. Still, certain parallels leave that particular door cracked open, and those who look into these ancient legends must wonder if Viracocha might indeed have been Christ. While there is a chance that the ancient Peruvians were either the people Jesus visited in the Book of Mormon or among those who separated from the main body of Lehi’s descendants, the idea that the Book of Mormon events took place in Peru is not one of the more popular theories. But even if the ancient Peruvians were not descendants of Lehi, that does not mean Christ did not visit them. He did tell the Nephites, after all, that they were not the only people the Father had commanded him to visit after his resurrection (see 3 Ne. 16:1–3).

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Hoyt clerked for the California Supreme Court before becoming a litigation partner at Gibson Dunn, where he tried what was at that time the largest case ever tried in the United States court system (the Coordinated Asbestos Coverage Case, with over one hundred defendants). Gibson Dunn’s litigation department was ranked first in the nation by *American Lawyer* magazine.

Prior to attending the University of California, Hoyt spent two years in Peru as a Mormon missionary, during which time he studied the legends of Viracocha as recorded by Spanish Catholic historians during the conquest in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Hoyt and Kirk Magleby wrote “Los Cristianos Pre-Colombinos,” which was printed and circulated widely in Peru.

While practicing law, Hoyt furthered his study of the history and archaeology of Peru, as well as of Mexico and Central America. He wrote numerous papers on Viracocha, Quetzalcoatl (white, bearded god of the Aztecs), and Kulkulkan (white, bearded god of the Mayas), and returned to Peru twice for research. Hoyt also published a book about his missionary experiences, which includes a discussion of the legends of Viracocha: *Two Years of Eternity* (New York: Vantage Press, 2010).