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## STELA 5, IZAPA: A LAYMAN'S CONSIDERATION OF THE TREE OF LIFE STONE

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Alan K. Parrish

**T**he Book of Mormon is a testimony of Jesus Christ, who is introduced in the twin visions of the tree of life given to the book's leading characters, Lehi and Nephi. Following their visions they taught their families about the life and ministry of Christ, who would come in the meridian of time, about his redeeming sacrifice, and his mission as the Savior of the world. Lehi saw a large tree "whose fruit was desirable to make one happy." Eating the fruit of the tree filled his soul with "exceedingly great joy," and he declared, "I knew that it was desirable above all other fruit" (1 Nephi 8:10–12).

Nephi's account of the same vision is much more detailed than Lehi's, and it includes a personal visitation of the Lord and a lengthy discussion with an angel of God. The two accounts extend over sixteen of the fifty-two pages of 1 Nephi (31 percent). Knowing the intent of Nephi's writing, "to persuade them [his father's descendants] that they would remember the Lord their

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Redeemer" (1 Nephi 19:18), one would expect the tree of life to be a preeminent symbol in the teachings of his seed. This investigation will examine the question of whether Stela 5, Izapa could be a depiction fulfilling that expectation.

## Background on Izapa

Izapa is of the preclassic period, approximately 300 B.C.—A.D. 300.<sup>1</sup> It was inhabited between the times of the Olmec and the Mayan civilizations. Writing about the Olmec civilization and the Mexico-Guatemala border region, Jacques Soustelle described the importance of Izapa:

The most important site is that of Izapa, to the east of Tapachula (Chiapas), in Mexican territory at a distance of several kilometers from the Rio Suchiate. What is spectacular at Izapa is the stone sculpture: 22 Stelae and 19 altars, plus other monuments, all covered with bas-reliefs. The style of these representations is extraordinarily dynamic and "baroque." The scenes depicted refer to a mythology that we know nothing of and that appears to be very different from that of the Olmecs. . . .

The tentative conclusion that may be drawn on the basis of what we know today, is that this border zone between Mexico and Central America saw a period of intense cultural activity in the last centuries of the first millennium B.C. and at the beginning of the pre-classic and proto-classic eras, between the Olmecs and the Mayas. Various local styles emerged, spread, and changed. Like that of Izapa, like that of the colossal sculptures, they are neither Olmec nor Maya; rather, they sometimes bear traces of the influence and the heritage of the past, and sometimes foreshadow the future.<sup>2</sup>

Gyles and Sayer described Izapa as a huge ceremonial complex containing monuments that display their gods and show busy scenes of daily life.<sup>3</sup> Gallenkamp adds that Izapan art is a warehouse of Olmec themes from which the later Maya culture drew.<sup>4</sup>

Bernal noted that Izapa was one of the first ceremonial centers that introduced priesthood and a formalized religion. These represented distinct advances in scientific, astronomical, and mathematical knowledge.<sup>5</sup> He also noted that the custom of placing stelae and altars in front of buildings, so prominent in Maya times, began in an earlier period at Izapa and similar sites.<sup>6</sup>



Hunter wrote, "The most important stylistic influence on the Pacific Slope in the Late Preclassic Period came from Izapa" and described many original characteristics including "deities descending from the sky, winged figures, U-shaped symbols, and the long-lipped god."<sup>7</sup> He also noted the Izapan influence on Maya monuments, and the rarity of dates, or glyphs.

Badner reported connections between Izapan and Chavin (Andean) art of northern Peru. He viewed Izapa as the direct connecting link between the Olmec and the Mayan civilizations, with numerous cultural and religious connections.<sup>8</sup> Coe described Izapa as "crucial to the problem of how higher culture came about among the Maya."<sup>9</sup> He also found it to be the connecting link between the Olmec and the Maya.

Smith found Izapan art to be highly specialized. "Far from being a connecting link in time and space between the earlier Olmec civilization and the Classic Maya art styles, the Izapa style is unique."<sup>10</sup>

## Interpretation and Analysis of Izapa, Stela 5

While many have praised the quality and significance of Izapa and its monuments, few have tried to interpret its art. Stela 5 is recognized as the most complex stela, bearing the most important message. Some brief interpretations give an indication of the difficulty of determining its message.

Keeler, writing on surviving tree of life customs, drew a reconstruction of the scene and gave the following interpretation of Stela 5 (see Figure 1):

This elaborate monument shows the Tree of Life beside the Earthmother's Genitals (zig-zag and slit). The Water of Life gushes forth to form the Oceans of the World (wave symbol). The "Two Headed Sungod" stands to the right of the Tree of Life with his Sacred Flute. The Two Headed Snake frames the picture. The Fish are symbols of the Earthmother. The Jaguar nose and teeth symbols represent the Physical Power of God. Chief Ikaniklipippi says that the bearded figure at the lower left is a Merman (Ansu), and that before him is a new Tree of Life. At the lower right is a monkey that sometimes symbolizes the Placenta Dragon. He holds a parasol which would be taken by the Cunas to be the Umbilical Cord and the Foetal Membranes of the child.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 1. A drawing of Stela 5, Izapa, as part of an interpretation by Clyde E. Keeler.

Miles carried out extensive study of the sculpture of the Guatemala-Chiapas region. An interpretation and drawing of Stela 5 (see Figure 2) follows:

Izapa Stela 5 presents a fantastic visual myth. A nine-branched tree whose origins are in a subterranean dragon variant divides the scenes. On the left bottom two men, seated opposite each other over an incensario that is like Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, wear peaked caps. The larger figure has a secondary man behind him who supports a short post with a bare alveolum dragon. At the back of the smaller figure a little man with a long lock of hair has some business with the tree roots. Directly above his head a small helmeted man seems to present two ring-tail fish to a larger figure wearing a cape and having birds on his left shoulder and on top of his head. On the right side, bottom, again two men sit in consultation, the larger having a flunky with an umbrella behind him. This large man appears to be a sculptor with a small slab at his knee and a chisel in his left hand. He gestures toward the child in front of his small companion. Above is another large man



whose face is erased with an enormous headdress. At his back a smaller figure carries a child on his shoulders. The whole is framed by great dragon heads, one quite serpentine, with enormous scroll hats, set on posts. Two ring-tail fish hang from the signature at the left while at the right birds (one looks like a vulture) contemplate the tree.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 2. A drawing of Stela 5, Izapa, as part of an interpretation by S. W. Miles.

Miller, a professor of history of art with specialized training in the numerous art forms of ancient Mesoamerica, gave this interpretation:

Stela 5 depicts a mythic origin from a central tree. Representation of natural flora are rare in Olmec and Maya art—the two traditions most clearly related to Izapa—and the tree of Stela 5 is a supernatural one, from which human forms flow, as if released by the large figure to the right, who uses his nose to drill an opening into the trunk. The scene may be designed for oral reading, with components recorded as if in simultaneous narrative. The old



couple at lower left who divine with kernels may be the ancestral couple (referred to in later Aztec sources) from whom all subsequent human beings descend.<sup>13</sup>

Two noted LDS researchers, M. Wells Jakeman and V. Garth Norman, have given Stela 5 exhaustive analysis. Their findings are the major focus of this investigation.

### The Jakeman Study

In 1946, M. Wells Jakeman filled a newly created BYU Chair of Archaeology at the recommendation of Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Council of Twelve Apostles. That December he was made chairman of the new Department of Archaeology at BYU. Dr. Jakeman received a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley in 1938 in the field of ancient history and Near Eastern archaeology. His dissertation was entitled *The Maya States of Yucatan, 1441–1545*. He had received his MA in history with an emphasis on ancient and Near Eastern history—biblical archaeology at the University of Southern California and his BA in history from the University of Utah, magna cum laude.<sup>14</sup>

The newly discovered Stela 5 captured the curiosity of Dr. Jakeman through its similarities to both the ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon. After considerable research he was prepared to present some courageous possibilities. Much of what he concluded was based on the reliability of the connections he found between Stela 5, similar ancient Near Eastern representations, and the tree of life accounts in the Book of Mormon. He published two significant reports. The first, addressed primarily to Church peers, was a consideration of Stela 5's being an actual portrayal of the tree of life visions of Lehi and Nephi.<sup>15</sup> The second was to professionals in archaeology.<sup>16</sup>

In the first report he noted twenty-three correspondences between the Izapa carving and ancient Near Eastern representations of the tree of life or related art conventions.<sup>17</sup> Having found these similarities, he stated:

What should we conclude from these several specific and close Near Eastern similarities presented by the Izapa sculpture? Certainly the arbitrary nature of most of the corresponding features seems to rule out the possibility of the ancient priest-artists of Izapa having hit upon them independently of the Near Eastern representations. . . . In other words, the Tree of Life symbol of



ancient America, especially as portrayed on the Izapa monument called Stela 5, must be considered definite evidence of a connection between the ancient civilizations of America and those of the Near East in the Old World.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Alfred L. Kroeber, “a leading authority on anthropological theory and method,” postulated that

a complex device used in two or more parts of the world suggests a connection between them in very proportion to its complexity. A combination of *two* or even three elements might conceivably have been repeated independently. [But] a combination of *five* or *ten* parts serving an identical purpose in an identical manner must necessarily appeal as impossible of having been hit upon more than once. *One thinks almost under compulsion, in such a case, of historical connection.*<sup>19</sup>

Jakeman based his proof of historical connection between Stela 5 and ancient Near Eastern cultures on the principles established by Kroeber. With a valid connection to the Old World religious art, interpretation of Stela 5 was greatly enhanced.

He found numerous connections between Stela 5 and the written accounts of the tree of life visions in 1 Nephi. He cited 22 correspondences, but in all but 2 of these he found several “points of agreement” from which he estimated the degree of correspondence ranging from “extreme” (as many as 38 points of agreement) to “rather close” (only 3–4 points of agreement). In all he identified 114 points of agreement in the 22 correspondences between the Book of Mormon account and Stela 5.

In addition to the correspondences, Dr. Jakeman noted:

Also significant, as tending to rule out accident, is the fact that there is nothing in the Izapa carving that cannot be explained in the light of the Lehi story (or in the light of Near Eastern art conventions probably known to the Lehi people of the Book of Mormon), or that *conflicts* with this story (e.g. an otherwise corresponding feature in the wrong place in the composition in relation to the representation of the Tree of Life).<sup>20</sup>

As to the composition of Stela 5, he noted some important aspects.

Now it is not likely that such a formally patterned composition would have *accidentally* included so many correspondences to the Book of Mormon Tree-of-Life story—especially in their correct



directional or spatial relationships—as actually occur in the Izapa carving. Very careful planning, in fact, would obviously have been necessary to achieve such a remarkable combination of formal design elements with special subject features. This, consequently, makes it even more certain that *intention*, and not accident, is the reason for the resemblance.<sup>21</sup>

All of the evidence confirmed his impression of a relationship between Stela 5 and the Book of Mormon, so strongly, in fact, that he boldly stated the “main conclusion” of his study:

By all the rules of correlation, the resemblances of the Izapa carving to the ancient Near Eastern symbolism of the Tree of Life . . . found in the Book of Mormon cannot be the result of accident, but must be due to historical connection; and that consequently *this carving is definitely a portrayal of the Lehi story*—i.e. the episode of the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi’s gathering his family around him and narrating to them the vision he had had of the Tree of Life, also as many of the features of that vision itself as possible, and the discussion and recording of Lehi’s account by his son Nephi.<sup>22</sup>

### Jakeman’s Interpretation of Stela 5

Under the direction of Matthew W. Stirling, exploration of Izapa sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society began in April of 1941. The National Geographic photograph is the oldest known photograph of Stela 5 and is the one Dr. Jakeman used to study the stone. From careful examination of both the Stela and the photograph, Dr. Jakeman made a drawing of Stela 5 (see Figure 3) from which we can review some of his interpretations.<sup>23</sup>

Feature 1: Dr. Jakeman indicated that this is obviously the principal person in the event depicted. The artist had endeavored to indicate that he was a religious leader teaching about the tree which had sacred religious meaning. “This person corresponds, in both character and role, to Lehi of the Book of Mormon Tree-of-Life episode.”<sup>24</sup>

Feature 2: Another of the six persons involved in teaching or learning about the tree appears to speak with the old man and to be in attendance upon him. The ear pendants, long-horned tiara, and age association suggest that this is a woman and probably his wife, an obvious correspondence to Sariah.





Figure 3. A drawing of Stela 5, Izapa, as part of an interpretation by M. Wells Jakeman.

Feature 3: Shown larger than others in front of the old man, this person appears to have considerable importance. A small beard seen through a magnifying glass indicates he is a young man. In his left hand is what appears to be a stylus or writing instrument used, as it appears, to record the teachings of the old man. This person corresponds well to Nephi.

Feature 4: This appears to be a young man holding a parasol over Person 3 and to be in attendance upon him. His actions identify Person 3 as a ruler whom he follows. This person corresponds well to Sam, third of the four sons of Lehi.

Feature 5 and 6: These also appear to be young men being instructed about the tree. Their mouths and hands show they are conversing with Persons 1 and 3 (Lehi and Nephi). Seated with their backs turned to the tree may indicate their rejection of the tree and the message it symbolized. These correspond well to Laman and Lemuel.



Dr. Jakeman found virtually all of the elements that Lehi and Nephi described in their twin visions. Beyond the specific items they described, Dr. Jakeman found some apparent glyphs identifying some of the chief persons.

Feature 9 held above Person 1 (Lehi) by Person 2 (Sariah) appears to be a hieroglyph recording the name of the old man so prominent in the scene. Dr. Jakeman identified this glyph as the *cipactli* (see-packt-lee) or "crocodile" symbol of ancient Mesoamerican hieroglyphics. It was used as a rebus hieroglyph for the name of a certain old man who in Aztec legends was said to have invented the calendar with the help of his wife. The symbol thus represented an old couple. After reviewing all of the possibilities of a couple in ancient Mesoamerican iconography, Jakeman concluded that this glyph identified the old couple of the Popol Vuh:

We are left, then, with the identification of the "Cipactónal" and "Oxomoco" of the Izapa carving with the *second* old couple of ancient Mesoamerican tradition—the "great father" and "great mother" reported to have been the ancestors of the ancient inhabitants of the Guatemala Quiché region after "the flood," i.e. the old man "Cipactónal" or "Ixpiyacoc" and old woman "Oxomoco" or "Ixmucané" also called "Zaqui-Nim-Ac" and "Zaqui-Nimá-Tziis," the immediate parents of two sons who became the first warrior heroes of the ancient Quiché Mayan people of highland Guatemala.<sup>25</sup>

This interpretation matches Lehi and Sariah whose two warrior sons Laman and Lemuel were very much like the two warrior sons of the old couple of the Popol Vuh.

More astonishing is the possibility that the glyph symbolizes the actual name of the famed old man.

This in fact is found to be the case. For the meaning of the name Lehi is the jaws<sup>26</sup>—especially the upper jaw—in side view, i.e. "cheek." And we have already noted that Feature 9, the *cipactli* glyph held above the old bearded man, mainly depicts a pair of huge jaws (those of the crocodile)—especially the upper jaw—in side view, i.e. a great cheek! That is, this glyph is essentially a portrayal of what the name Lehi means. It therefore constitutes—*whether intended or not*—a symbolic recording of that name. . . .<sup>27</sup>

That Feature 9 is an *intentional* glyph-recording of the name Lehi appears, however, to be the only possible conclusion. For the coincidence of symbol and meaning occurring here seems much



too peculiar to be accidental. (The changes of such a symbol as a cheek being associated accidentally, i.e. without reason, with a figure identifiable on other grounds as a person whose name had this same peculiar meaning, must be extremely remote.) It should also be pointed out that the simplest, most direct symbolization of the name Lehi by ancient artists would, of course, have been the depiction of a cheek.<sup>28</sup>

The headdress on Person 2, like a name glyph of Person 1, may be a means of identifying her as Sariah of the Book of Mormon. The headdress is unusual in early Mesoamerican art, but is very much like Egyptian representations of a queen or princess.

(*Sariah*, "Princess of Yahweh"). In other words, this crown can be considered as actually a kind of name-glyph (*derived from an Egyptian symbol*, just as expected), giving the name of the person wearing it as the Book of Mormon name Sariah.<sup>29</sup>

Having found evidence for the names of Lehi and Sariah in the Stela 5 scene, Dr. Jakeman indicated that he would expect something similar to identify Person 3, likewise a key person in the story depicted. From a consideration of various possibilities from which the name *Nephi* may have come, he found one in the Egyptian pantheon of gods with the very same pronunciation.

A close examination of the 1941 photograph of Stela 5 reveals that the headdress worn by Person 3 (Nephi) contains markings that tie it to Egyptian nomenclature.<sup>30</sup> There is a serpent projecting out from his forehead; behind the serpent is a human face with a plant rising above and leaves flowing from it down the young man's back. Having considered the possible connection, Dr. Jakeman concluded:

Now the reader has doubtless already observed that this peculiar headdress worn by the person with the stylus—very probably a young man's face in profile with a maize (i.e. Indian corn or *grain*) plant rising above it as a headdress or growing out of it . . . essentially duplicates the representations of the ancient Egyptian grain god, Nepri or Nepi (latter form, as we have shown, young man's figure with the face in profile and ears of wheat or barley [i.e. grain] rising above it as a headdress or growing out of it. In other words, this headdress is in fact the name-glyph we were expecting to find!—a symbol connected with the figure of the young man with the stylus and identifiable with the Egyptian grain-god symbol, thereby indicating that his name was that of the



Egyptian grain god, Nepri or Nepi (latter form, as we have shown, probably pronounced with the *p* aspirated), i.e. that he was the corresponding young man Nephi of the Book of Mormon.<sup>11</sup>

The result of these many correlations and the absence of alternative ones led Dr. Jakeman to identify a number of important consequences, some of which I include to indicate his convictions and the dynamic possibilities of Stela 5 (numbers in the original).

1. The first, of course, is that Izapa Stela 5 is thus the first ancient monument to be discovered as actually recording a *specifically Book of Mormon* event. The significance of this conclusion will be immediately apparent to the reader.

2. The second is that the particular identification we have given of the various features of the Izapa carving in the light of the Book of Mormon account, as warranted by the correspondences considered *separately*, now becomes (with the above identification of that carving as definitely a portrayal of the Book of Mormon account) even more certain or probable, as the case may be. For example, Feature 1 must surely now be considered *very definitely* a portrayal of the ancient Israelite prophet Lehi of the Book of Mormon. . . .

4. It is at this point that the extreme importance of the Izapa monument appears. For we have seen that the *second* resemblance of the carving on this monument, its very close and arbitrary resemblance to the special Lehi story of the Tree of Life in the Book of Mormon, *forces us to the conclusion that this carving is an actual portrayal of that story*. And this in turn necessarily establishes a connection between the ancient people of Izapa and the Lehi people of the Book of Mormon. Indeed, the accurate and detailed knowledge of the Lehi story (and of many Near Eastern art conventions) displayed by the ancient Izapans who produced the carving on Stela 5, can be explained only by their identification as an actual group of the Lehi people of the Book of Mormon.<sup>12</sup>

## The Norman Study

In 1965, V. Garth Norman began professional archaeological work as a research associate with the New World Archaeological Foundation (NAAF). His interest in the cultural history and religion of pre-Mayan times led him to study the Izapan ruins. His association with the NAAF culminated in a two-volume monograph entitled *Izapa Sculpture*.





Figure 4. A photograph of Stela 5, Izapa, with tracing and labels as part of the interpretation by V. Garth Norman.

Having considered previous interpretations of Stela 5, Norman saw the need to give the monuments and altars of Izapa the closest possible scrutiny and interpretation.

Adequate illustrations have been lacking, and even under first-hand observation many significant features have remained undetected due to difficulties resulting from extreme weathering of some parts of all the carved monuments. Consequently, incomplete or inaccurate observations have rendered invalid parts or all of most existing descriptions and interpretations of the Izapa carved monuments.<sup>31</sup>

To achieve these ends, Norman carefully cleaned each monument. Every possible detail that remained was exposed to the critical lenses of Graphic View Cameras that produced large, high-quality negatives. The larger negatives gave greater clarity to enlargements from which he produced a superimposed drawing of Stela 5 (see Figure 4). This drawing contains the details from which his interpretation proceeded. Photographs were taken



under a variety of lighting conditions. Water was sprayed onto badly damaged portions to reveal every trace of the original work.

All of the motifs of Stela 5 were then classified and considered with similar examples on other Izapan pieces. Careful study of each of the motifs in the whole Izapan library gave Norman a broader base from which to consider their appearance on Stela 5. In his report he called Stela 5 the "Supernarrative" and the "Grandiose Stela."<sup>34</sup> So thorough was his work that today he is considered the authority on pre-Mayan iconography of the region of Izapa and is a regular participant in symposia and seminars that bring together the most noted scholars of Mayan and pre-Mayan antiquity.

### Norman's Interpretation of Stela 5

General considerations that Norman took into account were relationships between the human figures in the scene and the movement patterns that seem to indicate the overall meaning in the events depicted. Relationship is shown in "gesture indicated interactions," direct contact between figures, the same height, and interassociated motifs and positions.<sup>35</sup> The central and most overpowering image is the tree, but the bird-masked deities on either side of the tree are also focal points. Norman points out that almost every feature on either side of the tree is somehow connected to one of the bird-masked deity impersonators and thus "appear generally to relate to the tree through them."<sup>36</sup> As all of the persons in the scene tie into the deity representative on either side, interpretation of the side scene should precede discussion of prominent persons in the scene.

#### The Right-Hand Scene

The right-hand scene is dominated by a complicated head of the U Serpent or Sky Serpent, labeled number 9 in the drawing. This serpent was a double-headed U Serpent. The other head is labelled number 15 and dominates the left-hand scene.

The basic symbolic function of the double-headed raised earth serpent is that of divine or supernatural power *bridging the sky barrier in transferring elements between the heavenly and earthly realms* with the two heads relating to the two-way movement.



The right-hand serpent figure undoubtedly characterizes the bringing of rains to the earth and the dual functions of rain in connection with earth life.<sup>37</sup>

Several parallels were identified between the two heads of the U Serpent though with the movement reversed.

We will see abundant evidence throughout the course of our investigation that the motifs in this parallelism relate to various aspects of the beginning (right) and ending (left) stages of man's life cycle.<sup>38</sup>

Person 2 in Norman's analysis is a priest representative of Deity A. This is indicated by the parasol held over his head by his attendant and by the Jaguar Snout headdress he is wearing. His connection to Deity A is also indicated by the contact of interconnecting objects in his headdress and his speech glyph with Deity A. Such a person was an intermediary between God and man. This priest representative role is also indicated by the hand glyphs of Persons 2 and 6.

Instructionally, as seems to be the Stela 5 usage, this hand sign could mean that the word or act in progress is in effect an irrevocable command or the unalterable conclusion of whatever is transpiring in regard to the instructed person seated opposite. . . . As a gesture perhaps climaxing the instructions, it might be interpreted as, "so be it,"—the last unalterable word of authority.<sup>39</sup>

Person 1 appears to be an attendant linked to Person 2. The unique thing about this person is the fact that he is seated beyond the ground panel, to suggest that he originated "from beyond the ground panel."<sup>40</sup> He is closely linked to Symbol 8.

Person 1 and Symbol 8 have been seen to have some correspondence with the beginning stages of mortal man through comparative evidence of corresponding figures on other stelae and through the symbolism of the right-hand earth serpent and its rain-cycle correspondence to man's life-cycle beginning at birth.<sup>41</sup>

Persons 10 and 11 are extensions of Person 1 and relate to his journey through life. Of this relationship Norman wrote:

I believe the sundry interpretive correspondences of Person 10 with Person 11, the child, traveler's staff, and surrounding sym-



bolical connections, all give evidence of functional aspects of humanity in general as opposed to the representation of specific individuals. It appears that this complex reveals various aspects of the nature of man's journey toward the Tree of Life including the postmortal phase.<sup>42</sup>

Deity A. Each person in the right-hand scene is connected to the scene through Deity A, a bird-masked, anthropomorphic, deity representative standing next to and facing the tree. His headdress and mask indicate the deity he is impersonating. In its most complete sense, Deity A represents Quetzalcoatl in a variety of his aspects or representations. The bird-serpent aspects connect to the Quetzalcoatl deity (Maya-Itzamna), the upturned snout and rain bands on the headdress mask signify a rain deity, while the long bill on the bird mask resembles a form of Quetzalcoatl, Ehecatl (eh-kot-ol). The Quetzalcoatl deity pervaded all aspects of life. In addition to being their creator, he controlled two important requisites to life, the right rains at the right times, and fertile soil.

Similar to the role of the anthropomorphic deity to the left in delivering the fruit of the Tree of Life, it appears that Deity A is holding supposed fruit or medicine bags, and that with his bird beak, forward bag, and forward foot touching the tree, he undoubtedly controls and directs what I feel to be a journey to the Tree of Life in this right-hand side. (Both deities might actually represent a paternal deified couple who preside over the sacred tree; see Deity B).<sup>43</sup>

Another important aspect of Deity A is his connection to Person 13. A line dissecting the tree extends from his bird beak to Person 13, whom Norman considers to be an immortal person.

The Ehecatl form of Quetzalcoatl seems most comparable to Deity A. This deity was for the Aztecs *master of the winds which normally precede rain*. The sign of Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl is a bird mask with a great bill which "transforms the human, masculine figure into the deity." . . . The bird seems to signify wind sweeping across the sky bringing the rain-filled clouds, and the bill suggests the mouth as the source of the wind (breath of god).<sup>44</sup>

Persons 3 and 4, like 10 and 11, represent "significant aspects of the nature of a man's journey toward the Tree of



Life."<sup>45</sup> Norman suggested that these represent "a beginning or intermediate stage in the 'journey' toward the Tree of Life."<sup>46</sup> Pursuing the similarities in these and migration myths led Norman to the mythical journeyings of Quetzalcoatl in Nahuatl theology, which he felt corresponded well with the right-hand scene. These myths seem related to the life cycle of man.

As in the Quetzalcoatl and Popol Vuh myths he is required to pass through a mortal probation in a "blinded" condition which includes torments and suffering before he is able to rise as a god (apparently after death) to the highest heaven. . . . Man is brought to "his lord" and apparently to the Tree of Life through responding to the guidance of deity representatives.

Potential correspondences to Stela 5 from this myth are rather striking. Although the details differ, the general conception is the same, and it is easy to see a common origin with the Stela 5 scene.<sup>47</sup>

Norman considered the features of the Sky Panel, the Ground Panel, the Water Panel, and the Tree. He looked at the movement lines and the triangles to understand every possible meaning and association in the scene. Further correlation in the tree, its trunk, roots, and branches suggests even closer connection with migration myths in the Boturini Codex<sup>48</sup> and the Popol Vuh.<sup>49</sup>

Evidence has mounted to indicate that the Popol Vuh and Boturini Codex migration traditions are closely related and have a common more ancient origin as portrayed in the Stela 5 narration. . . .

The "Tamoanchan/Tulan" tree on Stela 5 is a symbol of human transition, a representation of the ancestral tree (land of birth) from which man originated, and at once a symbol of the underworld land of death and the post-mortal heavenly paradise into which he can be reborn, as well as a symbol of his earthly Mesoamerican garden paradise. . . .

We can only speculate at this time that some historical facts are recorded on Stela 5 which have been carried up in recorded or oral traditions to survive in a few documents of the historical period.

Certain parallels between the Popol Vuh account and Izapa Stela 5 tend to push some elements of the Popol Vuh origin tradition back another thousand plus years. Stela 5 is not necessarily a record of any Popol Vuh migration account, but it does appear that parallels are too close to be entirely coincidental.<sup>50</sup>



### The Left-Hand Scene

Person 13 is a key in understanding Norman's interpretation. As noted above, he represents the arrival point in the journey depicted in the right-hand scene. He appears to have become a branch of the tree, being connected to it at the branch stub. He has some of the fruit of the tree in his hand and is being waited upon by Deity B. He is the opposite extreme of Person 1 and the representative of Persons 3 and 4, different mortal stages of the journey to the tree.

Deity B appears to be receiving the fruit of the tree, as represented in the mouths of the fish in contact with the deity's arms, and by the detached pieces, above the deity mask yet within the large scrolls that emanate either as smoke from the incense burner or speech from the deity impersonator. The deity appears to face Person 13 and is giving the fruit to him from the fringed bag in his/her hand.

Associated with Deity B are several fertility and feminine symbols, including the conch shell, the head masks, and the bird beak face masks. Another indication is suggested in the manner in which Person 13 receives fruit from Deity B, suggestive of a rebirth into a postmortal heavenly state.

Deity B correlates well with Mesoamerican goddess traditions as a goddess consort of Deity A. She corresponds well with Ix Chebel Yax, wife of Itzamna and as the moon goddess and wife of the sun. These representations are common in the codices of ancient Mesoamerica.

Persons 5 and 6. Person 6 is portrayed as an elderly man (ancestor) of prominence and probably royalty (indicated by the eye element of a profile deity on his cushion or throne). In character and action he is much like Person 2 considered above. His left arm and forefinger are outstretched in a directive gesture as discussed under Person 2. A piece of fruit from the tree appears to be touching his chin. His aged appearance suggests that he is near the end of his earthly journey.

Person 5 is closely associated with Person 6 and seems to be instructed or administered to by him. His hand gestures indicate receptivity to the instructions and offering on the incense burner emanating from Person 6. The smoke ring from the offering on the incense burner blown into the face of Person 5 indicates the prayer offering is in his behalf and that its benefit is for him. The suggestion is that Person 5 is advancing toward the blessings of



the tree in sustaining his life or his eventual partaking of the precious fruit.

The fruit before the mouth of the "skull" in Person 2's headdress, like that at the chin (approaching the mouth?) of the priestly Person 6, suggests that the fruit is *achieved in mortality but actually partaken of after death*. The aged Person 6 is logically in the final stage of his mortal journey and I suppose that in death he will actually partake of the symbolic fruit.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to these relationships of Persons 5 and 6, Norman observed that the right to left movement and the inter-connecting alignments of the triangles in the base panel indicate that Person 5 is being drawn toward Person 6. "It can be reasoned that Person 5 is being instructed in the pathway of Person 6 in order to reach the heavenly goal."<sup>52</sup>

Person 7 is positioned as to be assisting or attending Person 6. The bent back (like Person 6) suggests old age and the headdress, beaded necklace, and ear ornament suggest female identity. These features combine as if to indicate that Person 7 is a female attendant, probably the wife of Person 6. In her left hand there appears to be an obsidian or flint knife, while in her right hand is a decapitated ring-tail fish. These, with her headdress, indicate that she is making an offering. The deity mask (#14) connecting her to Deity B, her upturned face and eye focus on Deity B, and the feathered headdress suggest that she is making an offering to Deity B and is therefore a priestess of Deity B.

Norman agrees with Jakeman in the suggestion that Persons 6 and 7 qualify "as parents of original tribal chiefs who are evidently represented symbolically in the tree roots and possibly in figures of the right-hand scene."<sup>53</sup> Person 7 in association with the deity mask 14 complex is in "the very final stage of the mortal journey toward the heavenly destiny."<sup>54</sup>

The U Serpent 15 complex is the opposite representation of the Serpent 9 complex and the opposite end of the two-way communication with heaven. As the Serpent 9 complex described above signifies downward movement through rain from heaven, the Serpent 15 complex signifies the upward movement of the moisture toward heaven through evaporation symbols. Likewise, man's journey from heaven to this mortal world (Person 1) ends with his upward movement from this world toward heaven (Persons 7 and 13).



## Norman's Conclusion

From his comprehensive study of the art of Izapa, Norman arrived at the most detailed understanding we yet have of the many symbols in the scene on Stela 5. Having applied the best skills of the science of epigraphy, for which he has gained international recognition, he brought to his study a great deal of confidence. His conclusion is that *it is a portrayal of the road from man's beginning to man's ultimate life in an exalted realm with the Great God.*

While various sculptures give detail to specific phases, only Stela 5 reveals the full life cycle. This message is rather remarkably recreated in the central prominent tree on Stela 5; the tree symbolizing both the supreme God and his heavenly realm is the ultimate goal achievable by man, signified by partaking of the tree's fruit. Man's origin and earth life leading to that goal may be expressed symbolically in the tree roots and trunk markings with associated symbols:

The eternal tree—the human allegory—  
Spanning the course of mortal destiny,  
Marks the changing seasons of human events:  
The beginning;  
The struggle;  
The end;  
The beyond . . .

As an example of the way in which we might be able to eventually interpret verbally the "writing" on various Izapan sculptures, I have written *an imaginary ritual instruction passing from Person 6 to Person 5* on Stela 5; this verbalization is based on the interrelationships pointed out in the Stela 5 discussion:

"As your hands are open in supplication to God through this burned offering, as his priest I perform this offering in your behalf and in so doing point the way to everlasting life in the heavenly Tamoanchan paradise. Through your observance of sacred statutes in life's journey, you can reach this goal and partake of the fruit of the Tree of Life as I partake. The incense smoke rises heavenward before your face, blinding your eyes as with a mist of darkness, but it can carry your prayers heavenward through your inner faith returning the blessings of God upon your head as the dew from heaven [fish water symbol overhead]; and the water of life and the fruit of the Tree of Life will be bestowed upon you from above."<sup>53</sup>



## Since 1976

Since his publication of *Izapa Sculpture* in 1976, Norman has written further of his interpretation of Izapa and especially Stela 5. In March, 1984, he wrote of the relationship of both studies (Jakeman and Norman) to the Book of Mormon. While mentioning that much more data on Izapa and the vicinity is needed to prove the validity of Dr. Jakeman's conclusions, no one yet has successfully refuted them and his own study tended more to sustain than invalidate them.

In my opinion, due to limited data, the TLE [tree of life episode] hypothesis has been neither validated nor invalidated following the Jakeman studies. In order to verify a specific detailed Book of Mormon textual inscription, such as Stela 5, we would have had to reach for the whole picture of both Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican historical reconstruction. . . .

A major accomplishment set forth in my *Izapa Sculpture* was the high level of success in deciphering and accurately illustrating weathered and damaged details, by means of cataloguing and comparing all motifs on all the sculptures. Only in the course of this analytical process did the presence and significance of many details become evident. While some prior interpretations of Stela 5 were invalidated, most motifs previously analyzed were confirmed and elucidated. For instance *the cipactli glyph, a bared jawbone and possible name glyph for "Lehi" (meaning "jawbone" in Hebrew), was sustained*, in spite of decipherment of significant new details. The "Nephi" name glyph, however, is in serious doubt.

*While it is true that the many new details that emerged in my study of Stela 5 require changes in earlier interpretations, these differences by no means invalidate the central TLE hypothesis; rather, they have considerably deepened its meaning.* For instance, two of the more pointed meanings that have emerged, corresponding to the Book of Mormon account, are (1) a "dark mists" glyph, and (2) *the immortality theme.*<sup>56</sup>

Responding in the *Ensign* to the question "What is the current status of research concerning the 'Tree of Life' carving from Chiapas, Mexico?" Norman supported the work of Dr. Jakeman and made an important statement about the contributions of his own study to Book of Mormon doctrine.

The years of research since Dr. Jakeman's first study have neither proved nor disproved his thesis. As yet, published data has



been inconclusive, and will continue to be until we have a more complete picture of Izapan culture. In the 1970s I published an interpretive study of Izapa monuments, including Stela 5. . . . The study shows that Stela 5 occupies a central position, conceptually speaking, in relation to the other carvings discovered in Izapa, which display, among other concepts, the following: (1) There is an anthropomorphic god whose prime symbol is the sun and who dwells in the heavens and on mountains. (2) He is god of the Tree of Life, which relates to life after death. (3) At death, the human spirit rises into heaven from the body. (4) A physical resurrection is implied. (5) Worship involves sacrifice and a divine sacrificial atonement. And (6) the spirit of an unborn child originates in the heavens.<sup>37</sup>

Norman wrote of the importance of Book of Mormon archaeology giving some direction that pertains to the interest of all of us.

It seems that a major challenge has been to discover some solid ground from which straightforward, non-apologetic research can proceed. Once that gulf is bridged, Book of Mormon archaeology can come into its own with the same intensity and objectivity that have characterized much archaeological research in the biblical field. This can certainly result if research has succeeded in identifying a major artifact within a New World archaeological-cultural context, such as Izapa Stela 5, that can be unequivocally linked to a unique Book of Mormon text. This is one continuing interest in Stela 5 and the TLE hypothesis that potentially embraces ruins of the whole Izapan culture period. *This extremely difficult task demands a long-range scholarly commitment that should be second to none if we hope to succeed.*<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Izapa, especially Stela 5, is widely recognized for the valuable religious inscriptions on its monuments. Izapa also appears to coincide with both Book of Mormon dating and location, and therefore has drawn the attention of Church members with an interest in archaeological evidences of the Book of Mormon.

We should expect that discoveries of ancient American art will contain Book of Mormon themes. Most prominent will be the symbols embodied in the tree of life visions of Lehi and Nephi because of the importance of the message and its origin with the culture's founding ancestors.

The pioneering work of M. Wells Jakeman opened many eyes to the possibilities of a connection between known artifacts and Book of Mormon accounts. Further work by V. Garth Norman has provided substantial documentation supporting Jakeman's basic claims and increased evidence of a connection. From the solid base established by these investigators and related advances in other Mesoamerican research, there is good justification for increased excitement about external evidences relating to the Book of Mormon.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Jacques Soustelle, *The Olmecs: The Oldest Civilization in Mexico*, translated by Helen R. Lane (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984) pp. 19, 137; see also Ignacio Bernal, *The Mexican National Museum of Anthropology*, translated by Carolyn B. Czitrom (Mexico: Panorama Editorial, S.A., 1984), p. 34; Mary Ellen Miller, *The Art of Mesoamerica from Olmec to Aztec* (London: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1986), pp. 6, 59–61.
2. Soustelle, pp. 134–35, 136.
3. Anna Benson Gyles and Chloe Sayer, *Of Gods and Men, The Heritage of Ancient Mexico* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980), p. 124.
4. Charles Gallenkamp, *Maya: The Riddle and Rediscovery of a Lost Civilization* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1985), pp. 69–70.
5. Bernal, p. 34.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 132–33.
7. Bruce Hunter, *A Guide to Ancient Maya Ruins* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), pp. 32–37.
8. Mino Badner, *A Possible Focus of Andean Artistic Influence in Mesoamerica* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1972), pp. 7, 23.
9. Michael D. Coe, *The Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1984), p. 47; see also *Mexico*, by the same author (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1986), pp. 85–86.
10. Virginia G. Smith, *Izapa Relief Carving* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984), p. 48.
11. Clyde E. Keller, "The Cuna Indian Tree of Life," in *Bulletin of the Georgia Academy of Science*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1957), p. 32.
12. S. W. Miles, "Sculpture of the Guatemala-Chiapas Highlands and Pacific Slopes, and Associated Hieroglyphs," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 2, ed. Robert Wauchope (London: University of Texas Press, Ltd., 1965), pp. 258–59.



13. Miller, p. 64.
14. "The Pioneer Work of M. Wells Jakeman: An Editorial," *S.E.H.A. Newsletter*, #116, ed. Ross T. Christensen, 20 Oct. 1969, pp. 2–3.
15. M. Wells Jakeman, *Stela 5, Izapa, Chiapas, Mexico: A Major Archaeological Discovery of the New World* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1958); hereafter cited as *Stela 5*.
16. M. Wells Jakeman, *The Complex "Tree of Life" Carving on Izapa Stela 5: A Reanalysis and Partial Interpretation* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1958).
17. *Stela 5*, p. 71.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
19. A. L. Kroeber, *Anthropology* (New York, 1923), p. 216, as quoted in Jakeman, *Stela 5*, pp. 76–77; italics on last sentence added.
20. Jakeman, *Stela 5*, p. 83.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84; italics added.
23. Dr. Jakeman's interpretation has been severely criticized by some who allege that it reflects too strong a bias toward proving the Book of Mormon connection. Most of the criticism has been directed at Dr. Jakeman's interpretations and his qualifications to make the assertions he does. The critical assessments have been left out of the paper because the focus was upon Dr. Jakeman, not Stela 5. The most prominent of these critiques are: An unpublished manuscript by Hugh W. Nibley; John L. Sorenson, "Some Voices from the Dust," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. I, no. 1, Spring 1966, pp. 144–48; Dee F. Green, "Book of Mormon Archaeology: The Myths and the Alternatives," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. IV, no. 2, Summer 1969, pp. 71–80.
24. *Stela 5*, p. 16.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 32, n.49; see also *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols. (Nashville, Tennessee: Parthenon Press, 1962), v. 3, pp. 110–11.
27. The cipactli figure or pictoglyph, so common and prominent in later times, was in the period of Izapa simply a personal name glyph. "In other words, it here quite surely records the personal name of the old man as the name for what it depicts in the unknown (not necessarily Mayan) language of the ancient people of Izapa." *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.*, Dec. 1982, p. 4; italics added.
28. *Stela 5*, pp. 32–33.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 37; italics added.
30. A detailed discussion of an Egyptian connection and identification of this headdress pictoglyph as a name glyph of Nephi is contained in *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.* #151, Dec. 1982. This headdress is a well-known motif of Aztec and Mayan art and was called Centeotl (maize god) by the Aztecs. "The name of the grain spirit or grain god [Jakeman continues] which

was thus quite surely the name of the large young man or similar thereto, was, however, not the name of that spirit or divinity in the language of the Aztecs, *Centeotl*, since there is strong evidence that Nahuatl (Toltec-Aztec) was not a language of Mesoamerica until long after the period of Izapa Stela 5.<sup>31</sup>

What its meaning was in the period of Izapa is a more difficult question. Drawing upon Near Eastern connections, Dr. Jakeman has suggested an answer: "Consequently (returning to the crucial problem in its interpretation), the figure on the head of the large young man in the tree-of-life carving on that monument—quite surely a representation of the spirit of growing grain or young grain god of the Mesoamericans—*may well be a Mesopotamian or Egyptian iconographic motif.* . . ."

"It has been concluded that the function of this figure in the Izapa carving is that of a phonetic *name glyph*; i.e., a pictograph recording the name of the large young man. That is, it records his name as that of (or at least as *like* that of) the grain spirit or grain god, in the language or one of the languages of the ancient people of Izapa."

31. *Stela 5*, pp. 43–44.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 84–85; last italics added.

33. V. Garth Norman, *Izapa Sculpture*, part 2 (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Printing Service, 1976), pp. 6–7; italics added.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 329.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 167–68.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 171; italics added.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

44. *Ibid.*; italics added.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

48. "The Codex Boturini is an example of the type of book the Spaniards used to reconstruct Aztec history. It was painted after the conquest, but may be a copy of a preconquest work. It is a very long roll (7 ½ inches by 15 feet), probably painted in Tenochtitlan, and it tells the story of the migration of the Mexica before the foundation of Tenochtitlan." Esther Pasztory, *Aztec Art* (New York: Harry A. Abrams, Inc.), pp. 200–202.

49. "The Popol Vuh is the most important single text in the native languages of the Americas. It is unique among the books produced by ancient civilizations, whether Old World or New, in balancing myth and history . . ."



The original Popol Vuh was in Mayan hieroglyphs, but it was rewritten in a Latin alphabet adaption of the Quiche language in the sixteenth century." Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), inside front cover.

50. Norman, pp. 213–14.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 222–23; italics added.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 329–30; italics added.

56. *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.*, March 1984, pp. 7–9; italics added.

57. "I Have a Question," *Ensign*, June 1985, p. 54.

58. *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.*, March 1984, p. 7; italics added.