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## **A Land Touched by God? Investigating Quetzalcoatl, Jesus, and Mormonism in America**

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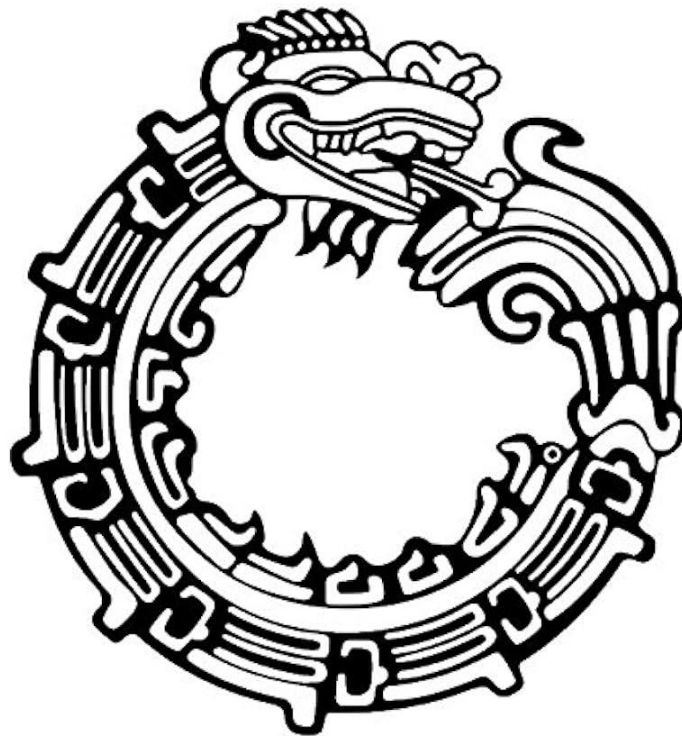
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A Land Touched by God?

*Investigating Quetzalcoatl, Jesus, and Mormonism in America*

By

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## Introduction

Centuries ago, not long after the first *conquistadors* had set foot on the American continent, some were met with a people quite strange to them. They would hear whispers of a god who had a human form, yet was most often depicted as a winged snake. Tales of his great sacrifices surrounded him, and he was said to have revived humanity when all had seemed lost. This god commanded the winds and the waters, connected heaven and earth, and was born of a virgin. One wonders if the Spaniards were astounded at the hearing of these stories. Perhaps they exclaimed: “After all Columbus was not the first, Jesus Christ has reached this continent before us!” Still it’s known that many were suspicious, and thought that the winged snake was a fabrication of the devil, made in order to steal the glory belonging to Jesus.<sup>1</sup> It is the induction of these similar Gods within Mormonism which will be the subject of investigation in this thesis.

In the Mormon religion there is a central theological belief that Jesus, after dying on the cross, visited the American continent. The worship of a Mesoamerican god with many similarities to the figure of Jesus has been received within Mormonism as evidence of Jesus’ visit to the Americas. This belief is still present among some Mormons, though it is no longer in its heyday, as this thesis will show. Through understanding the overlap between this Mesoamerican god named Quetzalcoatl and Jesus, as well as through investigating the interpretations of it by various Mormon thinkers, insights about the nature of the relationship between myth and history are made. Additionally a theory regarding the sociological benefits of religion is addressed.

Despite a generally scoffing attitude which many non-Mormons have towards some of the unconventional beliefs stemming from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for some, the reason for their existence is rather logical and understandable. The idea that Jesus has visited the Americas can function as an origin myth binding Americans to their historically close, yet geographically distant Christian past. Whereas the Middle East was the birthplace of Christianity, and Europe had had many centuries of Christian history, America had barely any. In fact, nations which need to lump in a great many subcultures into a monoculture for the sake of unity have typically relied on origin myths for their sense of identity. A well-known example would be the story of Romulus and Remus, the brothers who are said to have founded Rome.

Regarding the relevancy of this origin myth, the following can be said: Nowadays a great many people move across borders, and technological progress allows for increasing communication across the world. Along with this come these questions about what unites us, as well as questions as to what is worth preserving when it comes to traditional beliefs about nationhood. The idea of Jesus having come to America sheds light on the following issue; An ancient drive of humans to connect their place of birth to what they consider a holy origin, in order to render their land unified under its

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<sup>1</sup> López Austin, A. (2015). *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World* (G. Olivier & R. Davidson, Trans.). University Press of Colorado, 8.

principles. In these times of great movements of peoples, as many Western countries, chief among them America, are renegotiating their identity, learning about the Mormons grappling with these problems of identity and origin may give us some answers for our current problems. They may help us understand why and if a nation made up of many nations, like America, needs a unifier.

Having placed the subject of this thesis in its context, and having posited its relevance, what is left to investigate is the nature of this triumvirate of connected religious phenomena. In the first chapter the most well-known and significant myths concerning Quetzalcoatl are laid out mainly with the help of the writings of Alfredo Austin Lopez, David Carrasco, and B.C. Brundage. These are well regarded historians, who are not shaped by a bias one might attribute to Mormons investigating Quetzalcoatl. In the second chapter these myths and attributes are compared to those surrounding the figure of Jesus. Here the King James Bible is used as the chief resource. In the third chapter the main research question is answered more directly. This concerns the development within Mormonism of the idea, which from now on will be called the Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory. In answering the research question the history of this theory within Mormonism is traced. Prominent Mormon voices and their opinions on the theory are put forth in order to answer the question as to why this theory has been held in high regard within Mormonism. The following is the research question:

*Why has the belief that the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl was Jesus of Nazareth been argued for and adhered to within Mormonism?*

In investigating this subject it's important to know whether one steps on trodden ground or not. Many Mormons, as well as some non-Mormons, have written about the similarities between the two gods, with varying degrees of support for the theory. Prominent leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints like John Taylor and B.H. Roberts have written in support of the theory, naming some of these similarities in their reasoning, while not delving very deeply into the theory. There has only been one book devoted in large part to the theory, which is a book written by Mormon author Diane E. Wirth called *Quetzalcoatl, the Maya Maize God, and Jesus Christ*. Here the comparison is entertained quite thoroughly. As the title suggests, she compares Quetzalcoatl and Jesus, as well as the Maya maize god. There is some overlap between this thesis and her work. This thesis does after all concern itself largely with the question of similarities between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus, but in the end it attempts to answer questions about the sociopolitical matters surrounding it. Additionally, no work has as of yet sketched the overarching history of the development and popularity of this idea within Mormonism from its beginning until the present. This is where this thesis adds to the existing literature.

## **Chapter 1. Quetzalcoatl the Man-God**

Historian Alfredo Austin López writes in his renowned book on Quetzalcoatl: *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World* that the connection between myth and history cannot be doubted.<sup>2</sup> Regarding Quetzalcoatl myth and history are certainly interwoven. The figure is based in part on real patterns of human behavior (principles). He is said to have inhabited an physical body of a human as well, which is where the historical truth and the mythical storytelling especially start to overlap. This human “possessed by Quetzalcoatl” will be discussed in a later paragraph. Put broadly, in this chapter the narrative of Quetzalcoatl will be laid out. According to author B.C. Brundage one important thing to remember when it comes to Quetzalcoatl is: “Quetzalcoatl is actually fourfold. He is originally a flying dragon called the Plumed Serpent. He is also Ehecatl, the Wind. He is the Morning Star, whose name is Ce Acatl, One Reed. And finally he is the Toltec priest-ruler, Topiltzin. One of the difficulties in analyzing the god is to separate these four impersonations.”<sup>3</sup> In short, the winged snake is manyfold, and therefore it is difficult to get a grip on what the god represents precisely. Nevertheless, it is the purpose of this chapter to disentangle this myriad of different stories, and put forth a clear image of the nature of Quetzalcoatl.

Similar to the ancient Greeks, as well as many other civilizations, the Aztecs had a pantheon of Gods with interwoven relationships; an extended family of archetypal, larger than life beings representing various aspects of humanity. According to Austin López, Quetzalcoatl’s father is a figure whose historical reality and mythological nature are difficult to untangle. Unlike many of the Aztec Gods’ fathers, Totepeuh, the father of the winged snake God is often referred to as a human. However, he is also mentioned as a god. He is even referred to as “our father Totepeuh”<sup>4</sup>. The various divine fathers and mothers in the Aztec pantheon tend to represent either the heavens or the earth<sup>5</sup>, the same goes for Totepeuh, and so it can be concluded that, as for the mythological aspect of Quetzalcoatl, his father was at least in part a god representing the heavens. The Toltec priest-ruler Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl’s mother was a virgin named Chimalman according to at least one of the stories surrounding his birth. It was told that she was impregnated by the breath of the creator God.<sup>6</sup>

The Quetzalcoatl that historian Austin López initially writes about is a priest, a penitent man who fasted often. He writes: “The story is also told that, together with the priestess Quetzalpetlatl, he would come down in the night to the acequia (canal, or irrigation ditch), Xippacoyan, where the two

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<sup>2</sup> López Austin, A. (2015). *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World* (G. Olivier & R. Davidson, Trans.). University Press of Colorado, 148.

<sup>3</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 104.

<sup>4</sup> López Austin, A. (2015). *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World* (G. Olivier & R. Davidson, Trans.). University Press of Colorado, 150.

<sup>5</sup> López Austin, A. (2015). *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World* (G. Olivier & R. Davidson, Trans.). University Press of Colorado, 150.

<sup>6</sup> Wirth, Diane E. (2002) "Quetzalcoatl, the Maya Maize God, and Jesus Christ," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 11: No. 1, Article 3, 12.

performed self-sacrifices using thorns.”<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, Quetzalcoatl is “... the inventor of self-sacrifice; he is the perfect embodiment of the penitent.”<sup>8</sup> Important to note is the fact that self-sacrifice was not unique to Quetzalcoatl within Aztec culture. Other gods would make blood offerings, and acts of penitence were not unique either. That said, the fact that in Aztec mythology Quetzalcoatl was the *inventor* of self-sacrifice is very significant. One can imagine this raising several eyebrows within Mormon circles.

According to David Carrasco in his book *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire; Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition*:

“The human Quetzalcoatl is the founder, organizer, and ruler of an ideal type of city, whereas the deity Quetzalcoatl is the occasional creator, organizer, and sometimes ruler of the cosmos, which undergirded city and state. Both figures function as creative orderers of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

This idea of a creative orderer is a familiar concept within mythology as well as within religion. It is certainly divine archetype that is used frequently. Later in this thesis a similar Babylonian myth will serve as an example of this. Additionally this mythological human founder of the city of Toltec, regardless of the historical veracity of it all, represents certain human characteristics likely inspired by real human behavior. This behavior may have been the actual behavior of one man who was worshipped as the God Quetzalcoatl, or it may have been the behavior of many different people across the ages, shaping stories told across time, and eventually forming the stories of Quetzalcoatl left to us today.

Carrasco elaborates on this relationship between the man and the god in Aztec cosmology. The ‘real’ world was not the material world as the modern world tends to propose, but instead the most true was essentially spiritual. Therefore it became important that this ‘reality’ was instantiated through the imitation of a celestial archetype in the material world.<sup>10</sup> In this manner the ideal leader in Aztec society was he who could ensure harmony between heaven and earth. Quetzalcoatl the man-god fits this description. On the whole this idea of the instantiation of heavenly patterns in the material, whether it be in architecture or people, recurs throughout religions across the world. For instance the domes, or *vaults* in certain Christian churches and Muslim mosques represent heaven<sup>11</sup>. When it

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<sup>7</sup> López Austin, A. (2015). *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World* (G. Olivier & R. Davidson, Trans.). University Press of Colorado, 152.

<sup>8</sup> López Austin, A. (2015). *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World* (G. Olivier & R. Davidson, Trans.). University Press of Colorado, 152.

<sup>9</sup> Carrasco, D. (2000). *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition, Revised Edition* (Rev. ed.). University Press of Colorado, 64.

<sup>10</sup> Carrasco, D. (2000). *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition, Revised Edition* (Rev. ed.). University Press of Colorado, 70.

<sup>11</sup> *Genesis 1 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2015&version=KJV>

comes to a heavenly pattern being embodied in a person, of course the prime example in the Christian world is the figure of Jesus.

Let us return to the man Quetzalcoatl, a priest who ruled over the central city of Tollan, a semi-mythical city which was believed to be a kind of place of origin in Aztec mythology. This city was believed to be the center of not just the material world, but also the spiritual world. It was believed to be a kind of intersection of heaven, earth and the underworld. All the paths, both the “horizontal” paths of our earthly realm, as well as the “vertical” paths from the depths of the underworld towards the heights of the heavens, were believed to go through this city of Tollan which was ruled by Quetzalcoatl.<sup>12</sup> At the center yet again, now within this city, was the temple, the place of worship. And at the center of this place was the high-priest, the man-god Quetzalcoatl. Thus Quetzalcoatl is he who is at the center of the cosmos in the mythology of the Aztecs; On the meeting point of heaven and earth. This connects to the earlier idea of the celestial archetype being instantiated in the material world: Heaven having come to earth. One can view these archetypal patterns in the following manner as well: As mentioned, Quetzalcoatl is both mythological as well as historical, a meeting point of the spiritual world and the material world, of heaven and earth. One might call the mythological world that of the gods and thus the heavens. Whereas the historical world is that which happens in the material world, on earth. In this manner Quetzalcoatl is a unifier of heaven and earth in multiple ways.

Given the allusions to the figure of Jesus, one might ask oneself, when examining the Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory, the following question: why is he depicted as a winged serpent? In the West the serpent is broadly associated with ideas of evil and cunning. The snake has wings, and so one could easily compare it to a dragon as well. The dragon is similar to the snake, and is commonly thought of as an evil creature of chaos. However, this idea of chaotic evil is not associated with Quetzalcoatl himself in the stories. As a matter of fact, upon closer inspection, the winged snake is a fitting symbolic representation of a god who unites heaven and earth. What characterizes snakes is that they are the creatures which occupy the space lowest to the ground: in fact they are creatures which cannot help but be in the lowest places on the earth, inadvertently eating dust as they slither on the ground. This then, combined with the wings, turn Quetzalcoatl -fittingly- into a hybrid of the heavenly and the earthly. This raises questions: Is this just a coincidence? Was the “winged snake” a visualization of an already present idea of this “hybrid of heaven and earth”, consciously drawn with this symbolism in mind, or was there a large degree of subconsciousness involved? These are examples of questions which to this day puzzle those studying the subject. They pertain to the very origin of religious symbols, and the human conception of the divine itself. In this, the symbolism of the winged snake is not insignificant. Regardless of its origin, what is argued here is that its meaning is

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<sup>12</sup> Carrasco, D. (2000). *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition, Revised Edition* (Rev. ed.). University Press of Colorado, 71.



not a coincidence. In fact, Mircea Eliade points out in his monumental work *the Sacred and the Profane*, “The man of the archaic societies tends to live as much as possible in the sacred...”<sup>13</sup> He goes on to write that archaic societies had a completely different way of looking at the world. To them the most real were these glimpses of something extraordinary, something sacred, which they occasionally saw in the ordinary. Though they did not make the *real-unreal* distinction which the prototypical modern person make these days, in a sense they did think of the sacred as the most real. In other words, this thesis argues that the term “sacred” can in some sense be replaced by the word *meaningful*. For example the sacred nature of a stone would be revealed in and through its meaningful nature to the human encountering it. Now, returning to the sacred snake, Quetzalcoatl, and bearing in mind this archaic way of thinking, one can see the image more clearly as an image of the sacred present in the ordinary, or the *profane*. The wings being an image of the sacred, and the snake being an image of the profane, close to the ground.

The following is a specific tale about this human ruler of Tollan whose story came to historian H. B. Nicholson, by way of a Franciscan friar called Bernadino de Sahagun, who is considered the first modern ethnographer. Sahagun, present at the time of the conquistadors, lived in the basin of Mexico, and compiled many stories from the people native to the region. In doing so he was remarkably objective in his translations given the time in which he lived. In one of these stories the man-god called Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl is described as an ugly bearded wizard, the ruler of the ancient city of Tollan. This Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl is both a priest to Quetzalcoatl as well as a god himself. Whether he is the same god as Quetzalcoatl, is uncertain. There is some vagueness here. Regardless, as the story goes, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl allowed only sacrifices of snakes and butterflies to the god Quetzalcoatl, where in the past there would be gruesome human sacrifices. The sacrifice of the snake occurred in a different manner as well: The priest-wizard is told to have drawn his own blood every night.

This Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl is forced to flee Tollan when three wizards attempt to murder him. He goes on many strange adventures, and performs strange actions. The following are but some of these stories, summarized very briefly: he throws a rock at a tree for an unexplained reason, and he constructs a bridge. He “leaves the impression of his buttocks, hands, and tears in solid rock”<sup>14</sup>. He passes through many villages, giving them names. Another act which is especially notable for this thesis is the shooting of a tree into another tree, forming a cross. In the end he escapes the wizards by fleeing across the Gulf Coast on a raft made of snakes. Some expect him to return to his position of dominance, yet they have been kept waiting to this day.

Different versions of Quetzalcoatl have been discussed so far. There are many called Quetzalcoatl, both god and men, as well as strange combinations of the two, but the origin of the

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<sup>13</sup> Eliade, M. (1987). *The sacred and the profane: the nature of religion*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA32459129> , 13.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholson, H. B. (2001). *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl : the once and future lord of the Toltecs*. University Press of Colorado, 37.

feathered serpent lies way in the past, before this was his name. According to historian S. Sugiyama in his book *Human sacrifice, militarism, and rulership : materialization of state ideology at the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, Teotihuacan*, a temple to worship the feathered serpent was erected at around 200 AD. This marked the start of a new era due to a monumental cultural change brought about by a figure represented as a feathered serpent.<sup>15</sup> Certainly the fact that this temple was built around 200 AD means it is possible that the man in whose honor it was built lived within the 200 years previously. People would have to have had a fervor of faith due to some relatively recent event. The point in time during which the temple was built is a fact which would be pertinent to those within Mormonism who support the Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory.

Returning now to B.C. Brundage and the symbolic meaning of the winged snake; He writes about Aztec mythology and the notion that their world used to be inhabited by a great many dragons, representing the sky in all its forms: hurricanes, heavy rains, and blistering heat. There was a hierarchy among these dragons, and, according to the author: “Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent of the Aztecs, was the epitome of these celestial dragons.”<sup>16</sup>

Another thing that points to Quetzalcoatl symbolizing the highest heavens is Omeyocan, the heavenly residence of the high gods, which was associated with Quetzalcoatl in particular.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Quetzalcoatl was seen as a source of water. When the Spaniards invaded, the Aztecs believed that, should they chip even a millimeter of stucco off of the god’s base temple, water would flow out to drown the Spaniards. Besides this, as was common to Aztec gods, in his form as the lord of celestial waters, Quetzalcoatl could demand a child as sacrifice in times of drought.<sup>18</sup>

Quetzalcoatl is also found to have a strong connection to the wind. That invisible yet often violent and potent force was, in many of humanity’s ancient societies, connected to life, spirit and breath. It is no surprise then that Quetzalcoatl, being the god of the wind, and the very breath of life, was the only god thought to have some special care for humanity. In fact, he was credited with the creation of the first man and woman of the fifth sun.<sup>19</sup> The fifth sun is, in Aztec mythology, the fifth cycle of the death and rebirth of the human race. One can add the role of savior to the long list of roles fit for the Aztec deity.

There is yet another name which would suggest a role quite opposite to that of a savior: Morning Star is a name associated with Lucifer in the Christian narratives, yet among the Aztecs it belonged to the winged snake. The story goes that at the creation of the universe this Morning Star-Quetzalcoatl brought light into the world, even before the creation of the sun. A ruler of Tollan, and

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<sup>15</sup> Sugiyama, S. (2005). *Human sacrifice, militarism, and rulership : materialization of state ideology at the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, Teotihuacan*. Cambridge University Press, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 105.

<sup>17</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 105.

<sup>18</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 105.

<sup>19</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 106.

fierce warrior, this was the god whose name was Ce Acatl. The identity of this Morning Star often overlaps with Quetzalcoatl, yet there are versions of the story where Ce Acatl is a different, evil god. He was a being second only to the sun, and in certain legends tried to prevent the sun from rising. B. C. Brundage further highlights the difference between Quetzalcoatl and Ce Acatl, as well as their connection:

“Of all the transfigurations of Quetzalcoatl, Ce Acatl is the easiest for us to keep separate. The Aztecs themselves never forgot that these two were distinct deities, bound together only by the one reference in the myth where Quetzalcoatl, in flight from Tezcatlipoca, immolated himself on the shores of the Gulf so that his burning heart should ascend like a spark into the heavens to become the Morning Star. A gloss on this episode said that Quetzalcoatl disappeared for a time into the underworld, where he provided himself with atlatl and darts and only then rose as the felonious Ce Acatl. This is a companion tale to the story of the creation of the fifth sun. Just as the god Nanahuatl leaped into the pyre to become the sun, so did Quetzalcoatl voluntarily perish in the flames to become the Morning Star.”<sup>20</sup>

This story contains interesting, common patterns such as the ascent towards heaven as well as the descent into hell. This in itself may not be significant for our purposes, but the combination with voluntary self-sacrifice for the sake of saving humanity is rather significant given its similarities to Jesus. In the following paragraphs the connections of these patterns will become clearer.

Nearing the end of the life cycle of Quetzalcoatl, according to some stories Quetzalcoatl died by ritual suicide<sup>21</sup>. Meanwhile, according to another story, Ce Acatl, having ruled Tollan for roughly 40 years, is made aware of the time and place of his death four years prior to it: “the heavens and stars have told him that he must leave within four years, at the end of that period, in his forty-second year”<sup>22</sup>. And so he does leave for the location where he knows he has to die; A house in the direction of what we now call Honduras. There he falls sick, and dies. In the account from which this element of the tale of the Ruler of Tollan is taken, there is no explicit connection made to the god Quetzalcoatl. This ruler of Tollan is its first, and is called Ce Acatl. However, in other accounts, this first ruler of Tollan is shown to be the god Quetzalcoatl himself.<sup>23</sup> The connection between these two figures varies

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<sup>20</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 112.

<sup>21</sup> López Austin, A. (2015). *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World* (G. Olivier & R. Davidson, Trans.). University Press of Colorado, 161.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholson, H. B. (2001). *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl : the once and future lord of the Toltecs*. University Press of Colorado, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholson, H. B. (2001). *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl : the once and future lord of the Toltecs*. University Press of Colorado, 8.

depending on which story one reads, and so it can be difficult to untangle what precisely can be attributed to the winged snake god and what belongs to another figure.

This problem also existed for the Aztecs themselves. It took the form of a duplicitous twin god: Xolotl. This god is at least as ancient as Quetzalcoatl. According to Brundage, “The word xolotl probably originally meant "double," with the additional meanings of "servant" or "page" and probably "beast" or "monster.”<sup>24</sup> Xolotl is a dark and demonic entity, operating in the underworld. He and Quetzalcoatl are frequently confused in myths: According to some, Xolotl is responsible for the movement of the sun. He is said to have compelled it to move by sacrificing the assisting gods and finally, himself. According to an alternative myth it was Quetzalcoatl who sacrificed his twin, and so made the sun come up from out of the underworld. Brundage writes:

“Xolotl was additionally the god so familiar with the underworld that he was chosen to bring from there the bones from which the first men would be created, an act otherwise attributed to Quetzalcoatl. And it was Xolotl who nourished these first men.”<sup>25</sup>

All in all there were no stories of true oppositions between the twins. In fact they barely seemed to interact. It is Xolotl who is sometimes depicted wearing Quetzalcoatl’s regalia. But Quetzalcoatl was never depicted in a similar vein with anything connected to Xolotl. And so it is Brundage’s conclusion that Xolotl was a figure in Quetzalcoatl’s story rather than the other way round. The Quetzalcoatl-regalia Xolotl wears sometimes might be thought of as a kind of mask, whereby the demonic being disguises itself as the deity Quetzalcoatl in order to trick people. Brundage writes the following regarding Quetzalcoatl’s relation to creation and humanity:

“...there was a tendency among the Aztecs to tie a significant part of men's allegiance to Quetzalcoatl. Time and time again they iterated the fact that he had created the first human couple and that he continues to create each child as it is born. And his priesthood went even further: they sometimes claimed that he created the world and all things in it, an arrogation of supremacy more properly belonging to Tezcatlipoca.”<sup>26</sup>

Tezcatlipoca was another Aztec god more frequently tied to creating the world. Still, the fact that Quetzalcoatl is associated with creative power as well reminds one of the Christian God.

As was alluded to earlier, Quetzalcoatl is accredited with the creation of a new humanity after the Fourth Sun. Brundage compactly tells the story, and so I will simply let his words speak for themselves:

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<sup>24</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 119.

<sup>25</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 120.

<sup>26</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 123.

“When the fourth sun had ended, with the extinction of mankind, the gods stood deprived of their customary services. Accordingly they decided upon the re-creation of men, and they deputed Quetzalcoatl and his nahualli or double, who is here clearly Xolotl, to go into the underworld and cajole the Lord of the Dead into releasing the bones of those men. The Lord of the Dead imposed upon Quetzalcoatl, as a test of his worthiness, the task of blowing notes on his conch trumpet-an impossibility because there was no hole bored through the end. However, with the aid of worms which perforated it and the loud buzzing of wasps which entered it, Quetzalcoatl fulfilled the terms laid upon him and departed with the bones. After accidents which destroyed the perfection of the bones, he and his nahualli succeeded in bringing them up to Tamoanchan, where the gods eagerly awaited the conclusion of his mission. The Great Mother took the bones, ground them up, and placed them in an earthen tub. Over this Quetzalcoatl drew blood from his genitals, allowing the precious fluid to flow into the dust. The other gods followed suit, and out of the paste came a man and then a woman, the first created humans of the fifth sun.”<sup>27</sup>

Here we see that Quetzalcoatl may be the most important creative power for humanity, but he is not the only one. He has to work together with the other gods in order to create the man and the woman. This and other stories show Quetzalcoatl as standing midway between gods and men, and acting on behalf of humanity.<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion, these are some of the most well-known stories regarding the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl. In them is found a self-sacrificial uniter of heaven and earth, born of a god of the heavens, himself a ruler of the highest heavens, a creature of the wind, source of the waters and savior of humanity, brother to a mysterious twin who is in some ways similar to him, yet represents dark and demonic forces. At the same time Quetzalcoatl has gone into the depths of the underworld and to the heights of heaven, using his own blood and seed in order to help the human race be reborn. One can see the allusions arising, without doubt. In the next chapter this similarity to the figure of Jesus will be inspected more closely.

## **Chapter 2: Jesus the Divine Person**

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<sup>27</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 123, 124.

<sup>28</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 124.

Here the ways in which the figure of Jesus and Quetzalcoatl overlap will be laid out. Significant differences will also be illustrated. Important to note is that this chapter will serve primarily as a way of helping the reader understand the common Mormon perspective which is the subject of this thesis, namely the idea that stories of the Aztec God Quetzalcoatl refer to Jesus of Nazareth in America. In doing so there will be discussions of the meaning of symbols such as the snake. A frequent argument against setting the meaning of certain symbols in stone is that the meaning of a symbol can vary based on which perspective is being used. The argument is that there are as many interpretations of a symbol as there are human perspectives, and therefore none can be considered objective. There is some truth to this. However, the fact is that there are elements of existence which are universal to all humans, even to animals. For instance the fact that time moves forward, and the fact that water is needed for life, to name a few. All this is important to keep in the back of one's mind when reading about the meaning of the snake.

As is the case with Quetzalcoatl, similarly, when it comes to Jesus there is much discussion about where the myth begins and the history ends. C.S. Lewis, in one of his essays, famously called the figure of Jesus “myth become fact”<sup>29</sup>. This points to the connection between the “heavenly” realm of spirituality, meaning, and myth, and the “earthly” realm of material and facts. This is to argue that the material world without added meaning is mere fact. Whereas the “heavenly” world (not writing about the night sky here), is the world of meaning: immaterial, incorporeal, similar to a wind which has no power to move the leaves of a tree through force, but can, through words, convey meaning in such a manner as to move empires. Jesus then functions in a similar way to Quetzalcoatl in the Christian view, as a mediator between heaven and earth: the Word made flesh: highest meaning made material.<sup>30</sup> Quetzalcoatl is discussed as being a god who is closer to humanity, and is a god who often appears in human form. Jesus, in a similar fashion, is to many a more concrete and literally “personable” form of god rather than God the Father, who appears more distant. This is the experiential perspective on why Jesus can be seen as the mediator between heaven and earth, as in this way, he is the capital “G” God who occupies a close connection with humanity. There are also theological arguments as to why Jesus occupies this space: In the Bible he is referred to as the “second Adam”, and thus the origin of a kind of rebirth of humanity:

<sup>45</sup> And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.

<sup>46</sup> Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual.

<sup>47</sup> The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven.

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<sup>29</sup> Lewis, C. S. (2014). *God in the Dock*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

<sup>30</sup> *John 1 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%201&version=KJV>

<sup>48</sup> As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly.

<sup>49</sup> And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.<sup>31</sup>

The passage here refers to Adam having been made from dust from the ground, and Jesus having come from heaven. Looking critically then at the comparison between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus, one could argue that Jesus is even more of a heavenly creature than Quetzalcoatl. The winged snake has been described in the previous chapter as, at least symbolically, a figure of the earth (snake) as well as the heavens (wings). Yet in the Aztec mythology Quetzalcoatl also occupies the heavens, the throne room of the gods, and he commands the wind. Therefore the Aztec god also fits the description of a heavenly figure coming from above in order to aid mankind. A big difference between Christian theology and the religion of the Aztecs is that the former is monotheistic and the latter is polytheistic. While Christianity may accept the idea that there are other divine beings, which tend to be called angels, it is believed there is only one God. This is quintessentially different from the polytheistic Aztec faith, where the heavenly kingdom is occupied by many gods.

This idea of both Jesus and Quetzalcoatl as beings who connect heaven and earth, yet may themselves be seen as mainly heavenly creatures, bears some substance. A simple explanation is that they both are gods which have come from the heavens on to earth, and in this manner connect the whole of reality. This may remind one of the words of Jesus in John 17 about being in the world yet not of it:

<sup>14</sup> I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

<sup>15</sup> I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.<sup>32</sup>

This, among other things, alludes to the idea that what separates heaven and earth is not space, as one can be in the world yet not of it. Yet understandably, across cultures the concept of heaven has been associated with the highest aspects of existence. People come to enlightenment atop the mountains in a great many stories. The gods are often envisioned as having a place amidst the clouds. So too does Quetzalcoatl.

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<sup>31</sup> *1 Corinthians 15 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2015&version=KJV>

<sup>32</sup> *John 17 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

Moving on to the idea of the father in the heavens: Like God the Father in the Christian story, Quetzalcoatl's father is a heavenly figure. The relationship between God the Father and Jesus within the trinity according to Christianity is different from this relationship. Also, this alone doesn't support the argument of the Mormons in their connection of Quetzacoatl and Jesus as the same being, because gods generally tend to occupy the highest spheres in stories, as has been pointed out. The Aztec pantheon here is no exception. Yet I mention this similarity because the origin of a gods' parents is significant to their identity. More remarkable is the story whereby Quetzalcoatl's mother was a virgin impregnated by the breath of the creator god. The similarity of this story to that of the birth of Jesus according to the Bible is remarkable.

Quetzalcoatl was also represented in Aztec myth as a priest figure, who would give penitence using thorns. Jesus was no stranger to thorns, as the crown placed upon his head in the moment of his torture upon the cross was made of just that. This connection between self-sacrifice and thorns is another similarity between the two figures. Yet more significant is the fact that Quetzalcoatl is seen within the culture of the Aztecs as someone who denounced the sacrifice of humans, and was in fact seen as the inventor of self-sacrifice. One could write an entire book on the significance of the idea of self-sacrifice within the Christian worldview. It is in fact central to it. For now, let the following passage suffice.<sup>33</sup>

Before the story of Jesus on the cross, this narrative of self-sacrificial love being that on which the world hinges, that which could create stability, community and peace, was not widely spoken of. It stands to reason forms of self-sacrifice have existed since the dawn of humanity. However they did not reach the same level as the story of Jesus did. The stories of heroes and gods of old were usually about warriors who would be venerated for their courage and fighting ability. In Norse mythology Odin sacrifices one of his eyes, but he does so for the sake of wisdom, not to save humanity from death<sup>34</sup>. It was a strange thing, for the hero/god being worshipped to be encapsulated in the image of a man dying on an instrument of torture. The reason for this escapade pondering on the strangeness of the figure of Jesus, is that it highlights the uniqueness of this idea of self-sacrifice. This makes it even more remarkable that Quetzalcoatl was seen, completely independently of Christian civilization, as having been the progenitor of the idea of self-sacrifice (for the sake of humanity) in the Aztec world.

The central city in this Aztec world, as mentioned before, was Tollan. Quetzalcoatl was seen as both ruler and creative orderer of this city, and simultaneously of the world. Furthermore, this city was seen as being the center of the world, connecting heaven, earth and hell (vertically), and the paths of our earthly realm (horizontally). This is very much similar to an idea within Christian symbolism which views the cross as in part symbolizing exactly this. The French intellectual René Guénon, a very influential figure in the domain of metaphysics, has written extensively about the symbolism of the

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<sup>33</sup> Holland, T. (2019). *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*. Hachette UK.

<sup>34</sup> Gaiman, N. (2017). *Norse Mythology*. Bloomsbury Publishing.



cross. In his book *The Symbolism of the Cross* he writes about the nature of this horizontal and vertical meaning. The horizontal plane has multiple meanings here. The meaning important for the purpose of this thesis is the idea that the horizontal line in the cross is made up of all the individuals bearing their own individual “crosses”, thus meaning “all those on this earthly plane”<sup>35</sup>.

Without delving too much into the realm of metaphysics, as one can write many books on the subject of the cross alone, it can be argued that this “heaven, earth, hell-intersection” and this “intersection of all things on the earthly plane” concern a quality universal to the human experience. This is what Guénon argues. It would be a very good explanation for the existence of this similarity between Quetzalcoatl and the figure of Jesus. This idea is closely related to the idea of heavenly patterns being embodied in material beings, a concept which was mentioned in the first chapter. The man-god Quetzalcoatl is an example of this, as is the figure of Jesus. C.S. Lewis’ idea of Jesus being “myth become fact” is similar to this idea.

Having made some connections between the two figures, it is important to also address the most glaring difference: Quetzalcoatl is a winged snake. Besides the immediate connection to the snake in the Garden of Eden this brings up, Quetzalcoatl is at the same time a creature which is practically indistinguishable from a dragon. In the final book of the Christian Bible, the book of Revelation, this dragon, who is the same being as the snake in the garden, Satan, fights a war against heaven:

<sup>9</sup> The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.<sup>36</sup>

Knowing this, is it any surprise that when the conquistadors first encountered the worshippers of Quetzalcoatl they believed their god to be Satan in disguise?<sup>37</sup> Still, there is a Christian tradition identifying Jesus with the serpent: Jesus compares himself to the serpent Moses lifts up in the story of Exodus:

<sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:

<sup>15</sup> That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Guénon, R. (1996). *The symbolism of the cross* (3rd ed.). Sophia Perennis. (Original work published 1931), 10-11.

<sup>36</sup> *Revelation 12 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

<sup>37</sup> López Austin, A. (2015). *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World* (G. Olivier & R. Davidson, Trans.). University Press of Colorado, 8.

<sup>38</sup> *John 3(KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

The snake here is revealed not to be a creature purely of chaos and evil. Like Jesus, who is a healer who grants eternal life, the snake might be seen similarly in this case. The snake is also associated with healing through the more well known rod of Asclepius, the symbol of healing and medicine<sup>39</sup>. The association with the snake may well stem from the use of poisons in the healing process; most medicines initially make you sick in some way. This is to argue that the connection between the snake and the healer is not arbitrary, but may once again point to an experience of reality which is a human universal.

Furthermore, elaborating on the earlier point about the symbolic connection between the snake and the earthly, as well the wings and the heavenly, this maps on to Eliade's distinction between the sacred and the profane. Once again, the heavenly snake and the divine man are somewhat similar symbols in this case: a representation of the combination of the heavenly and the earthly. Another title of Jesus is "the Son of Man", as well as the "Second Adam". And so as Adam was created from the dust of the ground and the breath of God, this is once more an accurate representation of the heavenly in the earthly.<sup>40</sup> All in all one could somewhat reasonably make the argument that Quetzalcoatl being a serpent gives one yet more reason to believe the god is similar to Jesus, even from a Christian perspective. However, it is also understandable that for many Christians the opposite is believed, as was the case for many of the conquistadors.

Moving on to what one might consider more superficial aspects, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the ruler of the city of Tlaxcala, is described as a ugly bearded wizard. Though this is one of the less significant connections, it should be noted that Jesus also was not described as handsome in any biblical passage. It is the Christian belief that when in the Hebrew Bible the Messiah to come is mentioned, it refers to Jesus. And so the following passage is the main reason for this belief that Jesus was not particularly handsome:

<sup>2</sup> For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.<sup>41</sup>

This description of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl as an ugly bearded wizard therefore overlaps with the Christian idea of the figure of Jesus. Of the many tales told of this bearded wizard, one stands out especially: He shoots a tree into another, which forms a cross. This cross is not a significant element of the symbolism surrounding Quetzalcoatl. Besides this, at first glance the cross in the Christian story

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<sup>39</sup> Florian, S. *Asclepius*. (2024). Amsterdam University Press, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Genesis 2 (KJV). (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis%202&version=KJV>

<sup>41</sup> *Isaiah 53 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2017&version=KJV>

has the meaning of punishment and torture, where, in the Aztec tale about Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, it does not have this meaning. Nonetheless it should be mentioned, and can at least be seen as an additional coincidence connecting the winged snake and the figure of Jesus. Another aspect of this Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl episode is the hope of his return after his escape from the three wizards. The return of the hero is not an uncommon archetype these days. For instance *The Lord of the Rings* sees Aragorn return to take his rightful place as king in the third book, and the marvel blockbuster *Avengers: Endgame* has not one, but dozens of heroes return to fight the villain in the end. The claim here is therefore not that this story pattern is unique to only Quetzalcoatl and Jesus. This aspect of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's story does remind one of Jesus' return at the end of days, as per the Christian belief, and so serves as yet another similarity.

Quetzalcoatl is considered a god of the highest heavens as well. In fact, he is the mover of the winds, a force associated with the spirit. Significant here in investigating the connection to the Christian God is the following passage:

**1** In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

<sup>2</sup> And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.<sup>42</sup>

The Hebrew word translated as spirit is ruach, which can also be translated as wind or breath.<sup>43</sup> Where the feathered serpent is seen as ruling from heaven, a creator of storms, the origin of the wind itself, this breath or spirit that moves across the waters is connected to the Word, in Christian canon, in that it is the part of the trinity called the holy spirit. It is easy to see the connection between breathing and speaking. The breath of God moving upon the face of the waters is the spirit that creates the world:

<sup>3</sup> And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. <sup>44</sup>

This is the Word, a different aspect of the creative power, and a different aspect of the holy trinity. Moving on to the connection between that and the figure of Jesus, in the book of John is written:

**1** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Genesis 1 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

<sup>43</sup> *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh : the traditional Hebrew text and the new JPS translation*. (2nd [rev.] ed.). (1999). The Jewish Publication Society.

<sup>44</sup> *Genesis 1 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

<sup>45</sup> *John 1 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

And this Word is connected to Christ in the following manner:

<sup>14</sup> And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.<sup>46</sup>

This is how the gospel of John begins. The subject here is Jesus of Nazareth, and so Jesus is connected to the Word. Therefore the figure of Jesus can be seen as a personification of divine speech. Jesus being the Word made flesh, or the *logos* made flesh is a common idea within the trinitarian Christian denominations.<sup>47</sup> This is also a way in which Jesus acts as a person bringing the heavenly onto the earthly, another previously mentioned characteristic in common with Quetzalcoatl: the Word (heavenly) made flesh (earthly). One more similarity between Jesus and this “Lord of the Winds” aspect of Quetzalcoatl can be seen in the Gospels. The following is from Mark 4:39:

<sup>39</sup> And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.<sup>48</sup>

B.C. Brundage mentions Quetzalcoatl being thought of as the lord of the waters as well. This reminds one of the imagine of Jesus walking on water.<sup>49</sup> Moving on, in some stories Quetzalcoatl requires the sacrifice of children. These things do vaguely overlap with the God of the Bible. In the story of Abraham for instance he is asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, only for God to tell him not to at the final moment.<sup>50</sup> However these are also characteristics that, on their own, are general enough to apply to a great many gods that have been worshipped across the world. People have been sacrificing everything from animals to trinkets to people across history. Especially the sacrifice of children is opposite to what the figure of Jesus represents. Yet the mystery of the relationship between the God of the Hebrew Bible and Jesus is one which people struggle with to this day. The sometimes seemingly completely opposing faces of God the Father from the Hebrew Bible and that of God the Son are still a matter of discussion. Within the Quetzalcoatl mythology it is paradoxical as well, as the winged snake is told to have stopped human sacrifice, in one of his instantiations. In the same vein, the Christian perspective is that God the Son, Jesus, was sacrificed by God the Father, to save the world. This all points to what one might argue is, from the pro- Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory perspective, a confusion or

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<sup>46</sup> *John 1 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

<sup>47</sup> Swetnam, J. (1981). Jesus as “Logos” [Greek] in Hebrews 4,12-13. *Biblica*, 62(2), 214–224.

<sup>48</sup> *Mark 4 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

<sup>49</sup> *Matthew 14 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<sup>50</sup> *Genesis 22 (NIV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis%2022&version=NIV>

bastardization of the relationship between Jesus the Son of God and God the Father. Alternatively one could argue this points to the disconnection between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus.

In the Aztec mythology the serpent god is also accredited with the creation of the first man and woman after humanity dies out for a fourth time. In this sense he is a creator god. It may remind you of the creation of Adam and Eve, which would connect the snake god more so to God the Father in the Christian trinitarian belief, rather than God the Son, Jesus. The trinity is complex and full of mystery even to respected and venerated thinkers of the Church, and the roles and connections between the three as well as being one God(s) are just that; full of mystery and complexity. Therefore one could argue that overlap between Quetzalcoatl and what might at first appear to be God the Father can be counted as connections to Jesus.

Quetzalcoatl is the god of the Morningstar, which is in the Christian story, commonly associated with Lucifer, the devil. Returning to the quote by B.C. Brundage: ‘‘Just as the god Nanahuatl leaped into the pyre to become the sun, so did Quetzalcoatl voluntarily perish in the flames to become the Morning Star.’’<sup>51</sup> This is yet another instance of heroic self-sacrifice, which can be counted as arguably Jesus’ most important aspect. In this same episode Quetzalcoatl descends into hell. Similarly, in a lesser known and not always included aspect of the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection, called the harrowing of Hell, Jesus too descends into the depths of the underworld.<sup>52</sup> So although upon first glance Quetzalcoatl becoming the Morning Star (Lucifer) might make one think the devil was a closer fit, this is not necessarily correct. Jesus is referred to as the Morning Star in the Christian tradition, as well as in Revelation 22:16.<sup>53</sup> This is not to equate Satan and Jesus. One could write a dozen theses on this subject and still not fully understand it, and so for now the following conclusion will suffice: merely focusing on this aspect of the story, Quetzalcoatl becoming the Morning Star in an act of immolation makes him more similar to Jesus than to Lucifer.

On to Quetzalcoatl’s brother, named Xolotl. The demonic twin’s name can be translated as ‘beast’ or ‘monster’. As mentioned before, he is often depicted wearing the mask of Quetzalcoatl, making him a trickster figure, and an imposter. If one were to paint a narrative from the perspective of the conquistadors, this would support their interpretation of who Quetzalcoatl truly is (the devil in disguise). As a matter of fact, when the conquistadors first came to encounter the worshippers of Quetzalcoatl, they noted the many similarities to the figure of Jesus. There were several theories as to what this meant. One of the theories was that the winged snake was the devil in disguise, having come to the Americas before any Christian stepped foot there, in order to steal the glory meant for God for

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<sup>51</sup> Brundage, B. C. (1979). *The Fifth Sun : Aztec Gods, Aztec World*. University of Texas Press, 112.

<sup>52</sup> *1 Peter 3 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

<sup>53</sup> *Revelation 22 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

himself.<sup>54</sup> This masked demonic twin brother, Xolotl, from the perspective of these conquistadors, could therefore represent a subconscious suspicion of the Aztecs about the true nature of Quetzalcoatl. Now to be clear, there is no information on the opinions of the Spanish encountering Xolotl and integrating this demonic twin in their narrative somehow. All this serves to provide a more comprehensive account of the various interpretations possible regarding the many similarities between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus.

All in all, without giving credence to any actual historical connection between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus before the arrival of the conquistadors, the connections between the deities nonetheless abound. Firstly, the feathered serpent was born of a virgin according to one origin myth. A difference here is the virgin mother was a goddess. Quetzalcoatl is also the son of the father of the heavens, and the role of the winged snake in the world of the Aztecs is one (mostly) of a good god who facilitates the connection between the highest heavens and the lowest earth. He is considered the inventor of self-sacrifice, an unassailable ocean away from the landmass in which the Judeo-Christian stories started comprehensively formulating the idea a great many centuries before. Upon seeing a depiction of Quetzalcoatl one might abandon all thought of overlap with the figure of Jesus. After all, he is a winged snake, a dragon; An image, one would think, in the Christian tradition at least, only connected to the devil. Yet look further and one finds that Jesus compared himself to the snake Moses lifts up in the story of the book of Numbers. Then, perhaps most significantly, there is the story of Quetzalcoatl descending into the underworld and saving humanity using his blood. And so it is no surprise that the ears of those who want to look for signs of Jesus having come to America around the year 0 would perk up upon encountering the Mesamerican god.

### **Chapter 3: The Mormon perspective**

Before the specifics of the Mormon perspective on Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory are delved into, it is pertinent to provide a brief overview of the broader context of Mormonism in relation to this theory. The religious movement started with the Book of Mormon, a text which was translated from golden plates by Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the founder of Mormonism, as per his own telling. As the story goes, Joseph Smith was led to these plates by an angel. From the moment Smith started preaching he started attracting a growing number of followers, who, after his assassination, were led to the state of Utah by his successor Brigham Young. The exact year of the founding of Mormonism was 1830. The

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<sup>54</sup> López Austin, A. (2015). *The Myth of Quetzalcoatl Religion, Rulership, and History in the Nahua World* (G. Olivier & R. Davidson, Trans.). University Press of Colorado, 8.

religious movement now lays claim to almost 13 million adherents across the world. The mainline Mormon church is called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>55</sup>

Moving on to the Book of Mormon itself, central to the story contained in it is the journey of the Nephites, a people descended from the prophet Lehi from Jerusalem. They are embroiled in a centuries long conflict with another people called the Lamanites. The Nephites, along with the Lamanites, as well as two other peoples, the Jaredites and the Mulekites, end up in the Americas (though the Jaredites arrive earlier, but go extinct). Here, according to the narrative, the Nephites are visited by Jesus Christ in the flesh, pierced hands and all, in 34 AD. They hear him speak, and even touch his wounds. In 3 Nephi 11 is written:

**14** Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.<sup>56</sup>

This is Jesus, physically visiting the Nephite people in America, after his death on the cross, as told in the Book of Mormon. This passage is central to Mormon theology.

Returning to the reception of the snake-god, here some context regarding the theory is provided. As was discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the moment the conquistadors encountered the worshippers of Quetzalcoatl, they noticed the similarities between the feathered serpent and Jesus. In the following centuries theories surrounding the reason for these similarities abound. One, which is similar to the Mormon theory, is that the indigenous peoples of the Americas must have been related to the lost tribes of Israel.<sup>57</sup> This idea was not always necessarily linked to the god Quetzalcoatl, nor his resemblance to Jesus. It would float around across Europe and later in the U.S.A in somewhat varying forms, prior to the existence of Mormonism. Being similar to the more specific Mormon Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory however, it is hard to untangle precisely when this idea sprung up in Mormon circles. The relationship between these ideas will be examined in the following paragraphs.

There is no evidence of explicit mentions of Quetzalcoatl within Mormon writings in at least the first 50 years after its founding. John Taylor (1808-1887), the third president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is one of the first Mormons to write about Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory. He became president after Brigham Young, and has written on the Quetzalcoatl-Jesus connection in his book *An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and*

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<sup>55</sup> Bushman, R. L. (2008). *Mormonism : a very short introduction* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press, Ch. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Hardy, G. (2003). *The Book of Mormon : a reader's edition* (1st ed.). University of Illinois Press, 509.

<sup>57</sup> Mauss, A. L. (2003). *All Abraham's children : changing Mormon conceptions of race and lineage* (1st ed.). University of Illinois Press, 44.

*Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, which was published in 1882. Here he postulates that Quetzalcoatl and Jesus Christ are “the same being”<sup>58</sup>. He attributes differences between the two figures to the “impure source”, the Lamanites, which are those the Mormons believe the native American population were descended from.

Taylor quotes baron de Humboldt, an explorer who had encountered the Mexican tales of Quetzalcoatl. He refers to several aspects of the story of Quetzalcoatl which are remarkably similar to that of Jesus: The virgin birth aspect is one. Humboldt also writes of Quetzalcoatl being seen as both god and man, and his human form being present at the beginning of time, creator of both the world and humanity. The quote mentions: “...and that He had descended to reform the world by endurance, and being king of Tula, was crucified for the sins of mankind, etc...”<sup>59</sup> This word crucified here is used quite loosely. In the myths surrounding Quetzalcoatl no instance has been found in which the god is nailed to a cross. However, the god becoming human and eventually dying in an act of self-sacrifice, is rightly recognized by Humboldt as similar to the story of Jesus. John Taylor mentions the codex Borgia, a collection of old depictions of Aztec mythology. One of these images is interpreted as an image of Quetzalcoatl on a Greek cross (+)<sup>60</sup>. One can imagine that the many overlaps between the tales of Quetzalcoatl and Jesus gave many people at that time a pause, and John Taylor saw it as evidence for the reality of the story written in the Book of Mormon.

Moving further along the timeline of Mormonism first requires a short trip back into the earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century, a year after Joseph Smith brought the Book of Mormon to the wider world. In 1831 an Irish antiquarian named Edward King, Viscount Kingsborough (1795-1837) published *Antiquities of Mexico*, a collection of Mesoamerican codices. Which leads one to the year 1909, in which a leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, B.H. Roberts (1857-1933), who was also a historian and politician, names baron Kingsborough in his examination of the theory as the foremost person to have identified Quetzalcoatl with Jesus.<sup>61</sup> He goes on to point out the many similarities between the two gods. As for the contradictions, he argues something similar to John Taylor, namely the following:

“As for those adventures and human qualities found in Quetzalcohuatl not properly ascribable to Messiah, they arise, doubtless, out of the fact that the native traditions have confounded

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<sup>58</sup> Taylor, J. (2011). *An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. (2024, September 15).

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/36327/pg36327-images.html>

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, J. (2011). *An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. (2024, September 15).

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/36327/pg36327-images.html>

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, J. (2011). *An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. (2024, September 15).

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/36327/pg36327-images.html>

<sup>61</sup> Roberts, B.H. (1909). *New Witnesses for God (Volume 3 of 3)*. (2024, September 24).

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/59951/pg59951-images.html#CHAPTERXXXI>



some of the exploits and characteristics of other great personages who have figured in their history with those of Messiah.”<sup>62</sup>

This melting together of differing stories into one is something that happens in and across human societies. If one takes the Mormon idea that Jesus came to the Americas seriously, it would then be entirely reasonable to think that the reason for the contradictions between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus would be that stories become muddled over time, since stories tend to take on elements of other stories and grow into something different.

A Mormon whose writings contributed can be said to have ushered in a renewed interest in the connection between Native Americans and the peoples described in the Book of Mormon is Milton R. Hunter (1902-1975). He was an author and also a religious leader in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The publication of his book *the Gospel through the Ages* in 1945 was influential within mainline Mormonism. His book was dedicated to and used by the Melchizedek priesthood, which is the official mainline Mormon priesthood.<sup>63</sup> In it he does not bring up Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory specifically, but he does bring attention to the idea that Jesus came to America. The book being influential, it can be argued that it had a role in the renewed interest in theories surrounding the connection between Latin-America and Mormonism that followed.

During the golden age of interest in the connection between the native peoples of the Americas and those people written about in the Book of Mormon, there were several other articles on the subject published in the *Improvement Era*, the official magazine of the Church. Examples include *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon*<sup>64</sup> by Milton R. Hunter and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *Cumoram-Where?*<sup>65</sup>, also by Ferguson, as well as more on the more general subject of archeology as it relates to the Book of Mormon and the ancient Americas. Quintessentially, Ferguson founded the New World Archeological foundation in 1952, “...a nonprofit with a mandate to carry out archaeological excavations of Preclassic Maya sites in Central America with an eye to scientifically confirming the Book of Mormon.”<sup>66</sup> This foundation would send out expeditions and excursions to Central America, and spark the interest of Church authorities. It was folded into Brigham Young University in 1961.

Additionally, there was a general increase in evangelization to Latin America at the time. In fact the Church grew massively there in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>67</sup> This sparked a renewed

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<sup>62</sup> Roberts, B.H. (1909). *New Witnesses for God (Volume 3 of 3)*. (2024, September 24).

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/59951/pg59951-images.html#CHAPTERXXXI>

<sup>63</sup> Hunter, M.R. (1945) *The Gospel through the Ages*, Salt Lake City, Utah, Stevens and Wallis, inc, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Hunter, M. R. and Ferguson, T.S. (1950) *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon*, Literary Licensing, LLC.

<sup>65</sup> Ferguson, T.S. (1947) *Cumoram-Where?*, Zion's Printing & Publishing Company.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, C. C. (2024, February 18). *A People's History of Book of Mormon Archeology: Excavating The role of "Folk" Practitioners in the emergence of a Field - Dialogue Journal*. Dialogue Journal.

<https://www.dialoguejournal.com/articles/a-peoples-history-of-book-of-mormon-archeology-excavating-the-role-of-folk-practitioners-in-the-emergence-of-a-field/>

<sup>67</sup> Grover, M. L. (2005). The Maturing of the Oak: The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Latin America. *Dialogue (Salt Lake City, Utah)*, 38(2), 79–104. <https://doi.org/10.2307/45227402>, 1.

drive to connect the people of Latin America to the Book of Mormon, which naturally led to a renewed interest in Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory.

Moving closer now to the present, in 1969 M. E. Peterson had the article *The Great White God is a Reality* published, in which he definitively concludes that Quetzalcoatl is proof of Jesus having visited the Americas prior to the Spanish.<sup>68</sup> The article was published in *Improvement Era*. This shows that the theory was at this point at least tolerated, if not necessarily unilaterally accepted by the mainline church. Additionally, it can be concluded that the theory was far from being rejected.

Hugh Nibley (1910-2005), who was another well-known Mormon scholar, and a professor at Brigham-Young university, makes mention of Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory as well. He appears more skeptical, as he uses the theory in an argument concerning Mormon apologetics: “Ethan Smith contains a brief mention of Quetzalcoatl, though nothing could be farther from his mind than to suggest that Quetzalcoatl might be Christ, while the Book of Mormon contains mention of Christ without the slightest hint that he might be Quetzalcoatl”<sup>69</sup>. Important to note here is that the Ethan Smith referred to here argues in his book *View of the Hebrews*, which was published 10 years prior to the Book of Mormon, that the Native Americans were descended from the tribes of Israel. There is a common argument critical of the canon Mormon “origin story” which states that this book inspired Joseph Smith (no familial relation) in his writing of the book of Mormon.<sup>70</sup> In any case, the quote shows that Hugh Nibley does not find the idea that Quetzalcoatl was inspired by a real life appearance of Jesus in the Americas plausible. Nibley does not pay the theory much mind other than this. All this shows that there was disagreement within Mormonism concerning the veracity of Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory.

Now, moving on to the more recent past, there are still Mormon academics who do argue in favor of the theory. John L. Sorenson (1924-2021) writes about the many congruences between ancient Near-East culture and that of the Mayans and Aztecs in *Mormons codex: an Ancient American Book*. He does so in defense of the claim from the book of Mormon that multiple tribes travelled to the Americas before any European took a step there. In his chapter about religion he points to many specific similarities between the cultures from the ancient Near-East and Mayan and Aztec culture when it comes to images and stories.

One such example concerns the ancient South American story of an earth monster of which the top of its body formed the earth’s surface. The monster, as well as the primordial waters in which it existed, symbolized chaos. It was associated symbolically with the water lily. According to the tale

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<sup>68</sup> Peterson, M. E. (1969) “The Great White God was a Reality”, *Improvement Era* Vol. 72: No. 9, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Nibley, H. (1989). *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*.  
[https://openlibrary.org/books/OL2053105M/The\\_prophetic\\_Book\\_of\\_Mormon](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL2053105M/The_prophetic_Book_of_Mormon), 187.

<sup>70</sup> Hedges, A. H. (1997). View of the Hebrews, 1825 2nd ed. *Mormon Studies Review*, 9 (1997)(1), 63–68.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/44792741>

the monster had been fought, defeated and tamed by a beneficent deity when the earth was created. As the origin myth goes “the great Aztec gods Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl entered the body of the earth monster, split it in half, and left one half to form the earth while elevating the other half to make the heavenly firmament.”<sup>71</sup> This may remind the reader of the story of Genesis.

Sorenson points to the similarities of this myth to Babylonian cosmology. Therein the water of the great deep was regarded as the primordial element from which the universe was created. The chaotic “Deep” was portrayed as a dragon that was the enemy of light and law. The Babylonian god Marduk subdued it. As was the case for the monster within Mayan and Aztec mythology, the dragon was associated with the water lily. In the end of the story Marduk descends to slay the dragon. The earth’s surface was formed of the back of the floating dragon monster. Sorenson writes: “Marduk descended to slay *Tiamat* and raise up half of its body to become the dome of the sky while the rest of its body formed the earth.”<sup>72</sup> From this, and many more similarities, he concludes that those Mayans and Aztecs the conquistadors came across were actually descended from the peoples mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

Sorenson writes more about Quetzalcoatl as well: He writes of the connection between the Supreme god in Mayan mythology and the feathered serpent god. Where the Meso- and South - American peoples were often believed to have been polytheistic, there has been research suggesting some were closer to monotheism. In the research of Ringle et al. the following idea comes forward:

“Behind the multiplicity of gods, men, and the things of this earth lay [a conception of divine] duality [in central Mexico represented as the gods Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc], but behind this duality was an even more fundamental unity. Quetzalcoatl was both that ultimate aspect and the vehicle by which it was attained.”<sup>73</sup>

This is very similar to the role Jesus Christ plays in the trinitarian Christian belief, as in part exemplified in the following biblical passage:

<sup>6</sup> Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Sorenson, J. L. (2013). *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book*. Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Deseret Book, 492.

<sup>72</sup> Sorenson, J. L. (2013). *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book*. Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Deseret Book, 492.

<sup>73</sup> Ringle, W. M., Negrón, T. G., & Bey, G. J. (2008). The Return of Quetzalcoatl. *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 9(2), 183–232. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536100001954> 225.

<sup>74</sup> *John 14: 6 (KJV)*. (n.d.). Bible Gateway.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2017&version=KJV>

Due to this, and the multiple other similarities he writes about, Sorenson comes to the following conclusions: Although he does not directly claim Quetzalcoatl was really Jesus, he does go as far as to claim the similarities support the idea that the Book of Mormon has a Mesoamerican origin.<sup>75</sup> This means he believes in the Mormon claim that the peoples discussed in the Book of Mormon were really those Meso- and South -American peoples. All in all Sorenson's writings discussed here aid us in further understanding the continued interest in Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory within Mormonism.

Mormon writer Diane E. Wirth also tackles the Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory in her book *Quetzalcoatl, the Maya Maize God, and Jesus Christ* (2002). She does point to the many symbolic similarities between the gods. However one explanation for these similarities, she writes, is a desire of the Spanish, who were attempting to keep the peace in their colonies at the time, to "...please adherents of both Christianity and the religion of the indigenous natives."<sup>76</sup> She also notes something else which could be argued to undermine the Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory: around 200 C.E. imagery related to the feathered serpent is linked to militarism. Where Jesus was quintessentially a god of peace, Quetzalcoatl is worshipped as a god of war, sacrifice and power.<sup>77</sup> According to Wirth this undermines Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory somewhat. Wirth serves as an example of a more critical investigation of Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory within Mormonism in the modern age.

Having given an overview of the rise of Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory, as well as its decline in popularity, the question as to why it has this importance to many Mormons remains. If the research question is to be answered, we must go back to the Book of Mormon. Therein after all lies the origin of the idea that Jesus came to America. This idea is central in the Mormon faith, and as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, has sociopolitical implications. In his book *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*, Matthew Bowman examines the history of Mormonism as a uniquely American faith. In Joseph Smith's writings after the Book of Mormon Bowman sees this idea of a new Zion returning again and again. Zion is written of here as "The righteous society of believers whose loyalty to God and to one another meant they would live together in bliss and harmony."<sup>78</sup> Joseph Smith's view was that a new Zion would have to be created in America. He saw a need for the Christian religion, and a version of it that would bind people together as well as point their attention upwards, toward God. This binding is one of the primary functions of religion. It's in the name: the

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<sup>75</sup> Sorenson, J. L. (2013). *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book*. Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship Deseret Book, 492.

<sup>76</sup> Wirth, Diane E. (2002) "Quetzalcoatl, the Maya Maize God, and Jesus Christ," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 11: No. 1, Article 3. 6.

<sup>77</sup> Wirth, Diane E. (2002) "Quetzalcoatl, the Maya Maize God, and Jesus Christ," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 11: No. 1, Article 3. 13.

<sup>78</sup> Bowman, M. B. (2012b). *The Mormon People: the making of an American faith*. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol52/iss3/12/> , 46.

word “religion” comes from the Latin *religare*, which means “to bind”.<sup>79</sup> Joseph Smith believed that Mormonism more specifically was be the binding agent American people were in need of.

Moving on to specifics, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, in the Book of Mormon it is posited that indigenous Americans were not as indigenous as commonly thought, and in fact were descended from the tribes of Israel. This thesis argues that this can be viewed as a further impetus for a shared American identity of all peoples there at the time of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. And though as per the Book of Mormon, some of these descendants of these tribes did die out over the centuries, the Book also claims that Jesus physically went to America. Therefore its most salient claim is that America as a geographical place has been touched by God. One can understand how such a powerful idea might, if believed, create a reverence for the continent, and a community bound together by this idea. As evidenced by his writings about Zion, this has been an important goal of Joseph Smith.

There is the question as to whether Smith was right in that America would need to become a new Zion. This can be taken apart in multiple aspects. Firstly, does America require a story of a shared origin in order for its people to be bound together? Can America not be perfectly fine as a nation made up of different groups with different histories? This is something that is difficult to argue for, given the following: For one group, the story of their America is the story of adventurous Europeans who sought to find a new life in the wilderness through conquering and taming it. Then there are the Native Americans, whose shared history is in large part a tale of grief, and terrible loss, which nonetheless binds them. There is the Black American population, also with a tragic origin, as well as many others. Understandably and unfortunately, given this history, these peoples are more bound to each other by historical strife against one another rather than true unity. One might argue that the reality is more complex, and that might be true, but when writing of grand narratives of history, one cannot help but make generalizations.

All in all, America is the most powerful country in the world, and so something must’ve gone right. Yet the claim of this thesis is this happened despite the lack of unity rather than because of it. This journey into a look at the multiple origins of America is put forth to make a point: Smith was right in that America needed a story of a shared origin. Through the story of the Book of Mormon, the Native Americans were now a people who had Abrahamic lineage. The Book of Mormon even commands the Christian European population to covenant with the Native Americans, so that they might become Abrahams people too.<sup>80</sup> This is further evidence of the desire within Mormonism to bind both the Native Americans and members of the European American population together. This would be a step towards that vision of a new Zion of Joseph Smith.

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<sup>79</sup> Hoyt, S. F. (1912). The Etymology of Religion. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 32(2), 126–129. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3087765>, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Mueller, M. P. (2017). *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*. The University of North Carolina Press, 31.

This leaves aside the stories of other ethnic groups in relation to these Mormon ideas. For the purposes of this thesis, the example of the Native Americans will suffice: It shows, after all, that the Mormon project sought to bind together a peoples separated from each other, first by distance (and therefore lack of history), and then by conflict. However, if one is to bind people together, it must do so under a value system. This is where the Mormon offshoot of Christianity comes in. Though different from Christianity on key points (polygamy for instance), at its core did lie the teachings of Jesus.<sup>81</sup> This value system might alternatively be called “the thing the group aims at”, or, returning to Joseph Smith’s idea about Zion, a people bound together, and aiming upward, towards God.

Émile Durkheim’s sociological explanation for the religious impulse explains it thusly: He writes, speaking of the symbols that are worshipped in religions (*totems*):

“It is its flag; it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from the others, the visible mark of its personality, a mark borne by everything which is a part of the clan under any title whatsoever, men, beasts or things.”<sup>82</sup>

In light of this sociological explanation for the function of religion, one can see that the Mormons attempted to instill Jesus as the *totem* of Americans. However, Durkheim also argues that the *totem* is at once the principle, the God, itself, as well as this sign which represents the clan. Applying this theory further to the problem posed in this thesis, one can see more clearly why there was a need within Mormonism to connect the Native Americans to Jesus through the story of his visit to America, as well as the story of their descendance from the tribes of Israel. This would after all make the Native American population become a part of the *totem*, signifying the clan.

As the past recedes, it becomes murkier. There will therefore likely always be a mystery surrounding the genesis of the Book of Mormon. Mormons will believe in the words of Joseph Smith. Critics will call him a liar and a charlatan. If one is to make conclusions based on the information and arguments in this thesis, the following theory of Smith’s intentions is not unlikely: Smith may have seen the people in New World divided through a disjointed history as well as conflict. By forging a story which would connect all peoples therein to the tribes of Israel, as well as the figure of Jesus, he created a *totem* which, if believed, could unify those people living in America. This theory of Smith’s motivation would provide a framework of understanding regarding Joseph Smith as well as Mormonism which posits Smith as visionary aiming to unify America. Of course there is no way of proving this, and this is not the central argument of this thesis. This thesis merely posits this perspective as a reasonable one given the information and arguments it has laid out.

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<sup>81</sup> Gordon, S. B. (2003). *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (New edition 1). The University of North Carolina Press, 1.

<sup>82</sup> Durkheim, É. (1912/1995). *The elementary forms of religious life* (K. E. Fields, Trans.). The Free Press. (Original work published 1912).

To summarize, theories of Native Americans being descended from the tribes of Israel, or being related to the old world in some other way existed prior to Mormonism. The story of the Book of Mormon concerns one such theory. The specific invocation of the resemblance of Quetzalcoatl to Jesus as a way of arguing for the truth of Jesus' visitation to the American continent is, however, something that started happening roughly 50 years after Joseph Smith founded Mormonism. Though prominent members of the Church argued for this theory across the years, the heydays of the theory coincided with increased evangelization in Latin America, as well as a general increased interest in archeology starting in the 1950's. By the turn of the millennium, interest in the theory had subsided somewhat, although it is by no means gone, as proven by the fact that people continue to write about the subject.

Having given an overview of the history of Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory within Mormonism, and its importance to what is perhaps the most salient claim of the Book of Mormon, namely the idea that Jesus came to America, the following is the final argument of this thesis: Mormonism, having been founded by Joseph Smith, the man with dreams of a new, unifying Zion, has shaped the desires and aims of many Mormons who came after. Their interest in Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory can be explained in part by the need for validating the stories in the Book of Mormon which would inspire the creation of a new Zion, a unified America, bound by God.

## Conclusion

In the writing of this thesis there has been, on the whole, an attempt to understand the strange similarities between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus, in part through the Mormon perspective. The question surrounding this Mormon perspective was the following: *Why has the belief that the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl was Jesus of Nazareth been argued for and adhered to within Mormonism?* This thesis has attempted to answer this question in first laying out the stories and meanings of Quetzalcoatl in the first chapter. Here anyone with a general knowledge of the Christian story will see an abundance of similarities between the two gods. Connecting Quetzalcoatl to Jesus in some manner is therefore rendered understandable. In the second chapter the aspects and stories of Quetzalcoatl are compared to the Christian story one by one, rendering the similarities explicit, pointing out similarities that are less obvious, and showing the pertinent differences. As is pointed out in chapter three, there is not unanimous support for Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory within Mormonism: opinions range between dismissive, doubtful, apathetic, and supportive. Crucially, this thesis did not argue for or against the veracity of the stories within the Book of Mormon, but has rather sought to explain Quetzalcoatl-Jesus

theory and its causes and implications in light of the sociological function of Mormonism it has laid out.

In this endeavor, one should not forget the simple fact of the abundance of similarities between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus. It should be no surprise Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory gained significant steam within the Mormon community when confronted with all these similarities. Especially during the time in which there was a renewed interest in archeology and Latin America in general, when more of the similarities would rise to the surface, it stands to reason that upon encountering them, Mormons would be strengthened in their faith. Although the remarkable nature of the similarities between the two gods is a good explanation for the Mormon support for Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory, it does not get to its core reason.

As posited in chapter 3 in part with the aid of Durkheim's theory of *totems*, Mormons attempted to turn Jesus into a unifying *totem* for all Americans. Through the story of the four tribes described in the Book of Mormon, the Christian past instills itself in the American soil many centuries before the Europeans arrive. In this manner the continent becomes one steeped in those many centuries of Christianity, rather than one which is divided between adherents of disparate faiths. Therefore, it has been argued that Joseph Smith's vision of a people bound together in their faith would become more possible the more people would believe in the relation between the Native Americans and the tribes of Israel and Jesus.

This thesis has laid out the case for Quetzalcoatl-Jesus theory in a manner which does due service to its adherents, while showing arguments and theories surrounding the subject, both from within Mormonism, as well as outside of it. In investigating the sociopolitical aspect of the research question, the focus has been on the relationship between native Americans and the relatively newly arrived Europeans, and the Mormon perspective on this issue. The topic of Black Americans within this context has mostly been left out of this for the sake of brevity. One can theorize the degree to which the sociological explanation given in this thesis would apply to this American ethnic group. There is much to say regarding the changing view on this subject within Mormonism across time, however, delving into this was not necessary for answering the research question posed in this thesis, and therefore the subject was left out.

The sociological aspect of this discussion has been prime in this thesis. However, many questions surrounding the similarities between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus remain. If one is to limit oneself to the findings regarding the similarities within this thesis, in theory, coincidence could serve as an explanation. However, there are so many similarities that, should one believe there really is no historical or geographical connection between the figure of Quetzalcoatl and the biblical stories, further explanation is needed. At some points this thesis has pointed to the overlapping symbolism emerging due to deep human experiences common to all. Where this thesis nonetheless had its focus elsewhere, it would make for an interesting thesis further exploring this idea. However this would be best suited for a theology thesis. In lieu of getting to the core of this idea of a general human



experience of reality, this thesis has investigated what it defines as the Mormon argument as to what is needed to unite Americans. In understanding these Mormon ideas as attempts to unify a deeply divided land, those on the same mission of unification may learn from them.

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