The History of an Idea: The Scene on Stela 5 from Izapa, Mexico, as a Representation of Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life

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Abstract

Stela 5, a large stone monument discovered in 1941 in Izapa, Mexico, was identified a decade later by M. Wells Jakeman as a bas-relief of Lehi’s vision of the tree of life. Scholars and laymen alike have both accepted and scoffed at this theory. This article provides a historical sketch of reactions to this claim and discusses some of the implications of accepting or rejecting Jakeman’s theory. Jakeman was the first to publish an LDS interpretation of Stela 5; later V. Garth Norman proposed a different interpretation based on a series of high-quality photographs of the monument. Suzanne Miles, a non-Mormon, postulated that Izapa Stela 5 presented a “fantastic visual myth,” and Gareth W. Lowe proposed that Stela 5 presents an original creation myth. Further criticisms and responses ensued over the years.
The History of an Idea

The Scene on Stela 5 from Izapa, Mexico, as a Representation of Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life

Stewart W. Brewer

In 1941 Matthew W. Stirling of the Smithsonian Institution of Washington, D.C., conducted preliminary archaeological investigations at the site of Izapa in Chiapas, near Mexico’s southern border with Guatemala. During his work there, Stirling unearthed a large carved stone monument which he labeled Stela 5. Nearly a decade later, Professor M. Wells Jakeman, founder and chairman of the Department of Archaeology at Brigham Young University, claimed that the scene carved in bas-relief on the stone was a representation of Lehi’s vision of the tree of life as reported in the Book of Mormon.

Since that time Latter-day Saints have either accepted or rejected Jakeman’s proposal to varying degrees. Many have enthusiastically accepted his conclusions, while others believe that his claim lay somewhere between tenuous and outrageous. Notwithstanding criticisms from the beginning, Jakeman’s thesis gained widespread support in succeeding years from lay people and some scholars. This article presents a historical sketch of the reactions by Latter-day Saints and others to this claim about Stela 5 and discusses some of the historical implications of acceptance or rejection of Jakeman’s theory.
Izapa and Stela 5 in Ancient Times

The ruins of Izapa were inhabited by 1,400 B.C. However, Izapa did not become a major settlement until roughly a millennium later. In the period from about 300 to 50 B.C., it was an important ritual and artistic center; during this same time many of the sculptured stone monuments at Izapa were produced, including Stela 5.

Stela 5 is a slab of volcanic stone (andesite) that measures 2½ m high, 1½ m wide, ½ m thick, and weighs around 1½ tons. Originally it was erected in the front of what archaeologists labeled Izapa Structure 56 in Group A. In front of the stela sat Altar 36, a “flat-topped, irregular boulder.” The carving of Izapan monuments is unique in Mesoamerican art. A number of scenes on the stones at Izapa display a narrative style; they seem to tell a story or represent a segment of a myth. Connections have been demonstrated between representations in the art at Izapa and themes or events described in the Popol Vuh, the ancient sacred book of the Quiché Maya of nearby highland Guatemala. The people who anciently inhabited the Pacific Coastal lowlands of southern Mexico (the Soconusco area that includes Izapa) related most closely to the bearers of the earlier Olmec civilization and art style to the north.

The Olmec area proper was centered on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in the state of Veracruz, with extensions southward along the Pacific coast of Chiapas. A distinctive Olmec style of sculpture developed around 1,200 years before the time of Christ. Some archaeologists continue to speak of this Olmec development as the “mother culture” of all later high cultures in Mesoamerica. However, the art and culture at Izapa is far from being simply a direct descendant of Olmec art. While related, it has its own creative aspects. Arguments have even been offered proposing that Izapa could have been where the crucial developments in astronomy and calendar-reckoning took place resulting in the famous Maya calendar.

While the Izapa art style as such was primarily restricted to a small area along the Pacific Coast, the influence of its artists extended much farther. Features of the art at Izapa can be detected in cultures located in highland Guatemala, central Chiapas, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, and central Veracruz which is 300 miles away. There is evidence that migrants from the Chiapas area moved into the area north of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec during the ascendancy of Izapa and transplanted aspects of southern art and culture in certain of the northern settlements. Specialists in later Maya civilization consider that the art of Izapa also contributed signally to the development of the Maya style in the Yucatan Peninsula, acting as a transition between the Olmec and the Maya.

However, the glory of Izapa was short-lived. By A.D. 100 the site was essentially abandoned. The scores of monu-
ments that had been erected were left standing to weather the heavy summer rain and suffer from the resultant inroads of tropical vegetation. Parts of the site were occupied at various times thereafter, but it never regained its standing as a dominant, or even major, sacred center on the southern Pacific Coast of today’s Mexico.

Modern Discovery of Izapa and Interpretations of Stela 5

C. A. Culebro, a school teacher in Chiapas, was the first to publish a drawing of Stela 5 and offer a speculative interpretation of its scene. His drawing and notions appeared in a pamphlet privately printed in 1939. During the same general period, a few scholarly visitors saw the ruin, but actual investigation did not begin until archaeologist Matthew W. Stirling spent a week there in 1941. He cleared the vegetation from around 20 monuments, placed them upright, and photographed them. In 1943 he published a short illustrated report. Stela 5 was among the photographed monuments, and Stirling noted that it was the largest and most intricately sculpted of those he had discovered.

Stela 5 and the Lehi Tree of Life Stone

In 1953 Jakeman concluded that the depiction on Stela 5 represented Lehi’s vision of the tree of life as reported in 1 Nephi 8:10–15. His initial treatment of the topic came out in a special bulletin of the University Archaeological Society (UAS), which was an extension of, and supported by, the BYU Department of Archaeology (UAS’s name was changed to the Society for Early Historical Archaeology, SEHA, in 1965). In this preliminary essay, Jakeman included the relatively small photograph from Stirling’s report. However, his argument regarding the composition of the scene was based on a large drawing of the monument he himself made from an enlargement of that photograph. His analysis began with a discussion of Lehi’s dream as reported in 1 Nephi, then he presented and discussed a list of parallels that he believed to be visible between his drawing and the vision recorded by Nephi.

This publication created an immediate ripple of enthusiasm that spread from Provo and the BYU campus to other parts of the church. Over the next several years, the membership of the UAS increased “by several hundred percent,” mainly in response to the public’s reception of Jakeman’s theory. Some of the approbation was triggered by the BYU student newspaper which in 1953 ran several articles informing the faculty and students about the discovery. The articles encouraged students to support the UAS by becoming members, and many of their parents apparently responded also. Another result was soon apparent: Jakeman became a sought-after lecturer.

Throughout his career Jakeman published more than one version of his interpretation of Stela 5. The first, in 1953, was phrased in scholarly terms and did not demand that readers be very familiar with the Book of Mormon to appreciate his arguments. The discussion began by listing “Fixed Elements,” “Characters,” and “Dynamic Features.” The seven fixed elements were physical in nature—a dark wilderness, a tree, a river, a rod of iron, a straight and narrow path, a large field, and a large building. Some of these were less than obvious to the casual observer, but Jakeman pointed out artistic features that he considered to represent those elements. For example, the large field he believed was represented by a small uncarved segment of the background. He argued that it stood conceptually for a large field but could not be shown larger because the scene

M. Wells Jakeman’s 1958 drawing.
was so crowded. Eleven or twelve visible characters or personages were also identified, and Jakeman proposed names for seven of them, including Lehi, Sariah, Laman, Lemuel, Sam, Nephi, and a man in a white robe. Finally, Jakeman's ten dynamic features represented actions (such as “teaching”) or relationships between characters and scenes that were indicated in or inferred from the scriptural description of the vision.11

Crucial to this preliminary publication was a small reproduction of Jakeman’s drawing of Stela 5, with the specific elements numbered and his interpretation provided. The complete list of elements comprised 27 items, most of which he linked by inferences to the Book of Mormon text.12

Up until 1959 frequent references to Jakeman’s ideas appeared in the UAS newsletters and in the BYU campus paper.13 During this period Jakeman and the UAS tried to get the Mexican government to move the stela to the national museum in Mexico City for safekeeping and to allow visitors easier access. When those attempts failed, Jakeman dispatched people from BYU’s archaeology department to Izapa where they made a latex mold of the face of the monument. This mold was brought to the BYU campus early in 1958.

In 1959 Jakeman published one of his principal works, an expanded treatment of Stela 5.14 Unlike his first essay, this publication was directed to a predominantly LDS audience. It included a modified list of correlations and also identified what Jakeman characterized as “hieroglyphic names” near certain of the characters in the scene. These names appeared as artistic motifs that Jakeman considered virtual hieroglyphs, and which he “translated” as the names Lehi, Nephi, etc.

In 1960 Jakeman issued a new version of the 1958 publication that targeted a scholarly audience.15 Here he dealt especially with artistic motifs and iconographic aspects of the carving. He focused on features that, he argued, were shared by this Mesoamerican monument and various Near Eastern art styles and monuments. These parallels, he said, were strong evidence that a group from the Old World heartland had reached ancient Mesoamerica. In this treatment he made no mention of parallels to the Book of Mormon as such. Non-Mormon art analyst Charles Gallenkamp reviewed this monograph for the UAS newsletter and praised Jakeman for his objectivity in analyzing “a controversial though undeniably tempting area of speculation.”16

Later Scholarly Studies

Further development of thought on Stela 5 came as the product of years of investigation at the site by V. Garth Norman. He participated in the Izapa Project (1961–1965) carried out by BYU’s New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAF). Norman concentrated on producing high-quality photographs of all the monuments from Izapa known at the time, paying special attention to Stela 5.17 His photographs were taken under varied conditions of both natural and artificial light. In the “album” of his work published in 1973 by the NWAF, Norman presented for each monument both the best single photo he had obtained and, alongside it, the same photograph on which he had outlined features that had been revealed by alternative lighting arrangements but that could not all be clearly seen in a single photograph. His album became the basis for all subsequent discussions by scholars of this impressive body of art.

Three years later he published a large monograph in which he descriptively placed the art at Izapa in the context of Mesoamerican art in general as it was then known.

In regard to Stela 5, Norman considered that it represented one of the most complex narrative scenes found at Izapa. He noted that errors in detecting details of the art motifs on the stela had “plagued” Jakeman’s interpretive efforts, and therefore, “much of [Jakeman’s] work must be rendered invalid because of the inaccuracies in [his] reproduction of Stela 5.”18

After comparing the Izapa style and its motifs with other Mesoamerican art complexes, Norman proposed an
interpretation of Stela 5 that differed considerably from Jakeman's. Norman's view was that a "road of life" theme was central on the stone. It linked human birth, death, and rebirth to a different sphere of existence. Norman wrote on this topic for an LDS audience in 1985, in the Ensign, the official magazine of the church. He summarized the current status of thought on the monument. At this time he accepted Jakeman's tree of life interpretation "with some modifications," while questioning Jakeman's reading of "Nephi" as a name glyph. However, he later commented that "these differences by no means invalidate [Jakeman's] hypothesis; rather, they have considerably deepened its meaning."

Izapa: An Introduction to the Ruins and Monuments provided a technical record of the relationships among the natural setting, the ruins, the monuments and their art, and the archaeological record. Lowe observed, "I cannot escape the impression that Stela 5 presents an original creation myth, closely similar to those recorded very much later in the Popol Vuh."

Criticism of the Jakeman Interpretation

Even before Norman's revision of Jakeman's view, critics had challenged Jakeman's original thesis. Opposition came from both LDS and non-LDS scholars.

Sometime late in 1958, a typewritten seven-page paper by Hugh Nibley, professor of ancient scripture at BYU, circulated on, and presumably off, the BYU campus. In it Nibley sarcastically attacked all the major methodological and epistemological underpinnings of Jakeman's treatment of Stela 5.

His first complaint was that "Mr. J.'s" argument was based on an inadequate visual rendering of the stela. Instead of building his case on an independent draftsman's drawing, "the author's loving hand, guided by a wishful eye has actually created the only evidence available to the reader for testing the author's theories. Again and again the reader is asked to accept as evidence Mr. J.'s description of dim details which he (and, as far as the reader knows, he alone) has been able to descry with a magnifying glass." Among other criticisms, Nibley claimed that Jakeman:

1. Failed to consider whether the claimed similarities to Near Eastern art could also be found in, say, the Far East; even more fatally, it was said, he failed to compare the scene on the stela with Mesoamerican art but

Illustrated from myths of the Cuna Indians of Panama. He paid no attention to Jakeman's publications or drawings. In 1982 a major work summarized the results of the BYU-NWAF Izapa Project in the 1960s. Gareth W. Lowe, a BYU graduate who had become field director of the Foundation, was the principal author of the section that discussed the monuments. He directed the Foundation's four seasons of excavation at the site and was instrumental in getting Norman's monographs published. He was also by then a well-respected Mesoamerican archaeologist. This comprehensive report, Izapa: An Introduction to the Ruins and Monuments, provided a technical record of the relationships among the natural setting, the ruins, the monuments and their art, and the archaeological record. It also included a short but significant discussion specifically on Stela 5. Lowe observed, "I cannot escape the impression that Stela 5 presents an original creation myth, closely similar to those recorded very much later in the Popol Vuh." He also interpreted the scene on that stela in terms of its possible calendrical significance, likening signs on it to specific Maya and Aztec day signs and their names. Nothing he wrote acknowledged any connection of the piece or its symbolism with the Book of Mormon or Jakeman's hypothesis.

Other Interpretations of Stela 5

In 1965 Suzanne Miles, a Ph.D. researcher on Mesoamerican art, offered the first serious discussion of Stela 5 by a non-Mormon. She postulated that Izapa Stela 5 presented a "fantastic visual myth." She offered her own drawing, which differed in some areas from Jakeman's. Her analysis grouped Stela 5 with other Late Preclassic and Protoclassic period monuments at Izapa such as Stelas 2, 7, 12, 18, 21, and 22. This implied that the iconography or visual symbols on this whole set sprang from the minds of artists who shared the same myth culture. (So logically, if Stela 5 were to represent a Book of Mormon theme, then other sculptures associated with it could also be related to that same scripture.) While Miles did not openly consider, let alone reject, Jakeman's theory (probably she was not even aware of it), her interpretation of the art at Izapa did not support his proposed interpretation of Stela 5 nor the accuracy of his drawing.

Earlier, in 1957, Clyde Keeler also reached a different conclusion regarding the stela, interpreting it as reflecting widespread human psychological tendencies which he illustrated from myths of the Cuna Indians of Panama. He paid no attention to Jakeman's publications or drawings. In 1982 a major work summarized the results of the BYU-NWAF Izapa Project in the 1960s. Gareth W. Lowe, a BYU graduate who had become field director of the Foundation, was the principal author of the section that discussed the monuments. He directed the Foundation's four seasons of excavation at the site and was instrumental in getting Norman's monographs published. He was also by then a well-respected Mesoamerican archaeologist. This comprehensive report, Izapa: An Introduction to the Ruins and Monuments, provided a technical record of the relationships among the natural setting, the ruins, the monuments and their art, and the archaeological record. It also included a short but significant discussion specifically on Stela 5. Lowe observed, "I cannot escape the impression that Stela 5 presents an original creation myth, closely similar to those recorded very much later in the Popol Vuh." He also interpreted the scene on that stela in terms of its possible calendrical significance, likening signs on it to specific Maya and Aztec day signs and their names. Nothing he wrote acknowledged any connection of the piece or its symbolism with the Book of Mormon or Jakeman's hypothesis.

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instead analyzed it in terms of what and how “we [subjectively] might expect an ancient artist to represent;
2. arbitrarily discerned for himself evidence that nobody else could see, meanwhile ignoring or explaining away contrary evidence;
3. made gross errors in elementary matters of linguistic and iconographic analysis;
4. did not subject his work to any peer review by fellow scholars but published it himself with unjustified and ungraceful fanfare;
5. salted his argument with a multitude of “probabyls;” “evidentlys;” and “apparentlys;” to make it look dispassionate while they really served to convert his unfounded speculations into “facts” in the eyes of the unwary reader;
6. repeatedly violated the law of parsimony; that is, he proposed complicated and unlikely interpretations when simpler ones would have explained the evidence.

There is no evidence that Jakeman ever addressed any of Nibley’s specific criticisms, although he did publish a generalized defense (see below).27

Other critics of Jakeman’s proposal have included: on the anti-Mormon side—Harold W. Hougéy, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, and Latayne Scott; and on the Mormon side—John L. Sorenson, Dee Green, and more recently William J. Hamblin, professor of history at BYU, as well as John E. Clark in this issue. Hougéy’s arguments against Jakeman were mainly on logical grounds, but his anti-Mormon stance and argumentative language made the discussion seem to lack any objectivity in the eyes of Mormon readers. The same is true of Scott and the Tanners.28

In 1966 John L. Sorenson, in a review article that contained some cautions about LDS publishing on the Book of Mormon without more than off-handed reference to Jakeman’s work, acknowledged Jakeman’s role in training virtually all the Latter-day Saint scholars who were then engaged in research involving the Book of Mormon in ancient America. But Sorenson warned of “uncontrolled [cross-cultural] comparison” and the “absurd conclusions” that frequently result from using improper methods in comparing art and culture. He went on: “Particularly, it leads to over-ambitious interpretations of shared meaning and historical relationship, as in Jakeman’s previous pseudo-identifications of ‘Lehi’ (and other characters from the Book of Mormon) on an Izapa monument.”29

Three years later Dee Green, a professional archaeologist, warned that Mormon literature dealing with scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon, was generally inaccurate in handling archaeological materials. However, that was not surprising, Green observed, since the individuals providing “archaeological evidence” for the scriptures were not themselves archaeologists. (This was a sally aimed at Jakeman himself, who had had only very limited experience in excavation and the analysis of materials produced by archaeologists.) Green specifically issued a “warning . . . against Jakeman’s Lehi Tree of Life Stone.” He stated that Jakeman’s thesis had “received wide publicity [throughout] the church and an over-enthusiastic response from the layman due to the publication’s pseudo-scholarship.” He continued that Jakeman had derived all his interpretations from “his own hand-drawn version” of the stela rather than from an original photograph and certainly not from direct observation of the monument. Finally, and most damagingly, Green, who had been a student assistant under Jakeman in making and handling the latex mold of Stela 5, charged that Jakeman had altered the plaster cast of Stela 5 made from the mold “after his interpretation.”30

Other critics, both in and outside the church, have continued to doubt Jakeman’s proposal. In 1993, after a period of years without critical comments by anyone, William Hamblin offered a cautious but valuably insightful view of the whole affair, stating that while the connection between Stela 5 and Nephi’s record seems to be somewhat insubstantial, this parallel, or lack thereof, does not affect the veracity of the Book of Mormon itself.31

Response to the Critics

Rounding on the opposition, Jakeman continued to publish and defend his conclusions.32 In 1967 he responded to some of the concerns raised by Hougéy. His first point of rebuttal was that Hougéy’s criticism was not offered “as a serious contribution to the interpretation of the Izapa sculpture but as an addition to anti-Mormon literature.” Nevertheless, Jakeman did address three principal arguments in Hougéy’s pamphlet: the degree of correspondence between the stone and the text, the presence of non-Israelite elements on the stela, and the possibility of alternative interpretations. Jakeman’s answers consisted essentially of restatements of what he had said earlier about his evidence, but he added nothing new. He emphasized that Hougéy had no scholarly qualifications from which to analyze Mesoamerican iconography or criticize his interpretation. Overall, Jakeman appears to have been satisfied not to respond substantively or systematically to Hougéy’s points, considering them inconsequential.33

In the same response, Jakeman addressed two other critics. While Jakeman never named these two “Mormon writers,” it is clear that he was speaking of Nibley and Sorenson. Jakeman claimed that he was “unable to answer [Nibley’s] specific charges . . . whatever they may be,” since
he had not received a copy of, nor had he read, the unpublished critique. He considered that they did not merit response in any case due to Nibley's lack of qualifications in, or understanding of, Mesoamerican archaeology.34

As for Sorenson's comment, Jakeman said that he also was not qualified to speak on the matter because he had not himself studied Stela 5. Regarding Sorenson's claim that the labels “Lehi,” “Nephi,” and others were “pseudo-identifications,” Jakeman stated that his critic did not mention how or why he knew the name readings were in error, so did not give a response.35

It is evident in Jakeman's rejoinders that he typically chose not to deal with specific criticisms but attacked his critics' credentials for dealing with this subject. By this he appears to have been trying to eliminate from discussion all opinions about Stela 5 contrary to his own.

Other writers did support Jakeman in the presence of opposition. Michael Griffith, a student at BYU, and Diane E. Wirth, an LDS archaeological researcher, each published a defense of Jakeman's interpretation. Griffith stated that while he was an LDS missionary in Texas, he became aware of disbelief about Jakeman's views on the part of some church members as well as Hougey and the Tanners. His response addressed the Tanners' claims specifically inasmuch as Jakeman had already answered Hougey. Wirth answered criticisms by anti-Mormon writers on a variety of topics that included the tree of life claim. Both Griffith and Wirth accepted Jakeman's views and cast his qualifications and interpretations in a positive light.36

General Acceptance of Jakeman's Interpretation by the Latter-day Saint Community

Since the initial announcement of Jakeman's discovery, Latter-day Saints have sorted themselves out on various levels of acceptance or caution regarding his claim.

Knowledge of Jakeman's proposal spread quickly through the church. Sunday evening firesides given by him and others became a prime medium for spreading his ideas. Also, a few pamphlets and other nonscholarly publications presenting the tree of life claim became common. One unusual form was a sound recording by Wendel Noble, at one time a prominent LDS lecturer and radio personality, which was occasionally accompanied by slides of the stela.37 Moreover, a small plaster replica of the stone was made up and sold quite extensively.38 Newspapers also continued carrying the story. Most were from the Provo and Orem area as well as the BYU campus paper, yet material about the stela was reprinted as far away as California and England.39

Information about the Izapa monument was also taught in seminary and institute programs from an early date and has continued to the present in some places.40 References for further information on the stela appeared in the Seminary Book of Mormon Teacher Manual for 1978, although, as far as can be ascertained, these references were not included in official teacher's materials and manuals either before or since that date.41 An extensive folkloric body of information existed that a number of people now recall having heard in CES classes as they were growing up.

Although similar information was not included in Sunday School and Gospel Doctrine teacher materials, given the excitement surrounding Stela 5 in the 1960s and early 1970s, mention of Izapa in those classes would not have been surprising.

It may be expected that the new M oreno drawing of Stela 5 (the first in over twenty years) will change our views of what the art of Izapa represents . . . . It remains to be seen whether Latter-day Saints will embrace or neglect new evidence as it becomes available and whether they will rethink their past loyalties in the light of new findings.

Following the initial decade of excitement over Jakeman's findings, roughly 20 years of relative silence followed. SEHA and BYU publications said little about the matter in that interval. As a result, Ross Christiansen, professor of archaeology at BYU, presented an updated summary of the history of the Stela 5 matter for members of SEHA. He claimed that the sculptor of Stela 5 was indeed a Nephite, and he echoed Jakeman's claim that Izapa represented definite Nephite or Lamanite culture in the area and even that Izapa had likely been a Nephite temple center.42

Alan K. Parrish, professor of ancient scripture at BYU, wrote an article in 1988 for a BYU Religious Studies Center volume. Parrish reviewed work on the Izapa stone topic and summarized some of the interpretations given to that point. He included the treatments by Keeler, Miles, Jakeman, and Norman. Parrish accepted Jakeman's view along with Norman's modifications. He supposed that "we should expect that discoveries of [other] ancient American art will contain Book of Mormon themes." He further asserted that the "solid base established by these investigators" justifies further search for "external evidences for the Book of Mormon" of this sort.43 The same year C. Wilfred
Griggs, a classics scholar and professor of ancient scripture at BYU, who was noted for his excavations in Egypt, mentioned Jakeman and Izapa 5—but only in passing in a footnote—in an article in the Ensign on the tree of life theme in the Mediterranean and Near East.44

The 1992 Encyclopedia of Mormonism included a discussion by Martin Raish, then professor of art history at BYU, on the tree of life theme in LDS belief. The four distinct instances he noted were the Garden of Eden tree, Lehi’s vision, Alma’s parable (see Alma 32:28–43), and Izapa Stela 5. His article is conservative, stating that while Stela 5 is “exceptionally difficult to interpret,” some scholars believe that a correlation to the Book of Mormon does exist. Interestingly, in his short bibliography, Raish cites Christensen and Norman, but not Jakeman.45

Raish’s treatment of Stela 5 in the Encyclopedia is quite different from an earlier paper, where he dealt harshly with LDS uses of archaeology in relation to the scriptures in general. Referring there to Stela 5, Raish echoed Sorenson by observing that cross-cultural comparison in the form of “shopping lists” of shared traits rarely produces meaningful results. He concluded by exhorting church members to be selective in what they purchase, read, and pass on concerning the Book of Mormon setting.46

Speculation and thought on Izapa Stela 5 has continued to the present. Recently, Joseph Allen, operator of the largest tour service to “Book of Mormon lands,” began a newsletter entitled the Book of Mormon Archaeological Digest.47 In an early issue, Bruce Warren, formerly on the BYU faculty in archaeology, proposed that, based on present thought and Mesoamerican correlations of Book of Mormon sites, Izapa would have been a Lamanite, not a Nephite city.48 This is an interesting new view of the situation. Regarding his tours to various sites in Mexico and Guatemala, including Izapa, which are also conducted by some BYU religious education faculty members, Allen says that probably 90 to 95 percent of his participants have already heard of Stela 5 and know of its purported correlation with Lehi’s dream.49

New Evidence and the Reevaluation of Stela 5

John E. Clark, professor of anthropology at BYU and current director of the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation, presents in this issue new information on Izapa Stela 5. For the last two years Clark and the Foundation’s staff artist, Ayáx Moreno, have been visiting Izapa and other sites where carved stone monuments of the Preclassic age (i.e. Book of Mormon times) are found. The visits have been for the purpose of preparing the most detailed art representations yet done on these ancient pieces. Moreno’s drawing of Stela 5 which accompanies Clark’s article, is the seventh serious archaeological rendering of the monument. Clark sees the Moreno production as the culmination of a process of improvement in representational techniques. Each new rendering has permitted, and demanded, new interpretations of the Stela 5 scene as details of the engraved scene have been added or subtracted.

It may be expected that the new Moreno drawing of Stela 5 (the first in over twenty years) will change our views of what the art of Izapa represents. Clark’s pictorial presentation and brief analysis of Stela 5 marks the beginning of a new stage in the study of this renowned piece of ancient art, not a completion of research on it. The process of study that Jakeman began with his first interpretation of the stela 46 years ago is still far from played out, either for Latter-day Saints in general, or for scholars. In light of the Moreno-Clark project, it remains to be seen whether Latter-day Saints will embrace or neglect new evidence as it becomes available and whether they will rethink their past loyalties in the light of new findings.
ENDNOTES

The History of an Idea: The Scene on Stela 5 from Izapa, Mexico, as a Representation of Life Carving on Izapa St. 5


10. See Christensen, The Tree of Life in Ancient America.


13. Ibid., 38-46.


17. Ibid., 105.


26. Ibid., 9-10.

27. Ibid., 10.


30. A miniature plaster replica of Stela 5 is still available from Gary R. Wagstaff, a seminar teacher in Hayward, California.


43. See also Joseph L. Allen, Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon (Orem: J. L. Allen, 1989), 109-29.


45. Personal communication, May 1998.

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