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## Izapa Stela 5 and the Book of Mormon

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**Abstract:** A representation of the “tree of life” was found in a carving on a large stone monument in Southern Mexico at the ruin site of Izapa. It was the fifth of carved stone slabs located in the temple courts. The art style is pre-Mayan. It appears to represent two cherubim or Near Eastern-type figures, six figures that surround the tree, and a river of water. Two name glyphs were discovered and translated into the names Lehi and Nephi.

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The monument, "Stela 5," shown here partially unearthed, is the largest monument so far discovered at Izapa. It is about eight feet high, five feet wide, and two feet thick.



Izapa, Chiapas, where Stela 5 was unearthed, is a city of ruins located in the southern part of Mexico.

## Izapa Stela 5 and the Book of Mormon

by M. Wells Jakeman, Ph.D.\*

An important religious symbol of ancient America, just as of the Old World, was that of the "Tree of Life."

Some years ago a new representation of this symbol was discovered in ancient American art, in a carving on a large stone monument unearthed at the ruin site of Izapa in southern Mexico. (See photograph and map. This monument is the fifth of the numbered stelae or carved stone slabs that once stood in the temple courts of the ancient city of Izapa; and it is the largest monument so far discovered at that site, measuring approximately eight feet high, five feet wide, and two feet thick.)

This new Izapa carving of the Tree of Life, in fact, may surpass in importance all other finds to

(For Course 9, lesson of December 17, "Moroni, the Last of the Nephites"; for Course 15, lesson of December 10, "Moroni Finished His Father's Work"; and of general interest.)

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date in the field of American archaeology. In the first place, it is much older than any previously-known representation of this symbol in the New World. (The carving is in an earlier art style than that of the well-known Maya sculptures of southern Mexico and Central America — a style which dates it probably to the first or second century of the Christian Era, or as much as half a millennium earlier than the Maya portrayals of the Tree of Life.)

Secondly, and perhaps because of its much earlier date, the Izapa Stela 5 representation differs significantly from all previously-known representations of the symbol in the New World, either Maya or Aztec. For here the holy tree is shown naturalistically, with eight branches bearing fruit. (In all the later Maya and Aztec portrayals the Tree is conventionalized into the form of a two-branched, cross-shaped tree or maize plant—the so-called "cross" symbol of ancient America.) Moreover, two personages here shown guarding or worshiping the Tree appear as *supernatural* beings rather than merely human priests as seen in the Maya and Aztec representations. In fact, they have a definite resemblance to the supernatural beings seen guarding or worshiping the Tree of Life in ancient Assyrian and Palestinian representations of this symbol in the Old World. For just as the genii seen guarding the Tree in these ancient Near Eastern portrayals—which apparently represent the cherubim spoken of in the biblical story as guarding the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden—so also the personages seen here (1) are two in number; (2) stand facing the Tree on either side, in the conventional posture of figures in ancient Near Eastern art (face in profile, shoulders in full front or three-quarters view, but the legs unnaturally again in profile with the feet in tandem); (3) have bird heads and—in the case of one of them—wings; and (4) hold bags (for the fruit of the Tree?) and a pointed object raised towards the Tree!

What must we conclude from these several detailed similarities which the Izapa carving presents to the Near Eastern portrayals of the Tree of Life? Certainly the arbitrary nature of most of these correspondences (i.e., their unexpectedness, since unessential to the basic symbolism of the Tree of Life), seems to rule out the possibility of their having been hit upon independently by the ancient priest-artists of America and the Near East. In other words, the Tree of Life sculpture of Izapa Stela 5 must be considered strong evidence—perhaps the strongest yet to come forth from archaeological research—of a connection between the an-

cient civilizations of America and those of the Old World.

But the Tree of Life with its two cherubimlike or Near Eastern-type figures, though the central feature, is only part of the Izapa carving. In fact, this carving presents one of the most unusual and interesting scenes ever encountered in ancient American art—a complicated portrayal of some ancient event *concerning* the Tree of Life.

For prominent among the additional features are six persons shown seated around and apparently discussing the fruit-bearing tree in the center or Tree of Life. The principal one among them is an old, stoop-shouldered man with a long, full beard (i.e., a white man?), seated oriental-fashion on a cushion facing the tree, and wearing a high pointed tiara, which resembles the tiaras worn by ancient Israelite high priests. His hands are outstretched in speaking gestures towards the tree, i.e., he is apparently saying something concerning the tree—the Tree of Life—to the other five persons seated around.

Another of the six is apparently also a person of advanced years, who sits behind the old bearded man on a cushioned stool, wears a tall horned and feathered crown (which resembles the ancient Egyptian crown worn by a queen or princess!), and holds an emblem over the old bearded man; possibly this is a female personage of similar age in attendance upon the old man.

The remaining four of the six persons, seated on the ground in front of this older couple, appear to be four young men, three of whom wear oriental-type turbans. One of them is portrayed as larger than the others and as holding a pointed object, evidently a stylus, with which he seems to be recording—on a rectangular object that must be a plate or tablet, seen resting on the ground before him—what the old bearded man is saying about the tree.

Also depicted in the carving is what is evidently a river of water coming by the tree, as well as many other things not previously seen in ancient representations of the Tree of Life.

Here, in fact, we have what appears to be no less than an ancient portrayal in stone of the very episode of the Tree of Life found in the Book of Mormon, *1 Nephi 8*—the ancient Hebrew prophet Lehi narrating his vision of the Tree of Life to his family gathered around (evidently his wife Sariah and the four sons who came with them into the wilderness—altogether six persons in this episode, counting Lehi himself, the same number as shown here); his words being recorded on a plate by one of his sons, a young man named Nephi, described as “large in stature” (*1 Nephi 4:31*); and one of the features of the vision itself being a river of water coming by the tree!

In 1958 an expedition of the archaeology department of Brigham Young University to southern Mexico obtained a latex mold of this remarkable carving. Careful study of the mold, in comparison with the monument itself and an excellent photograph of the latter obtained by an expedition of the Smithsonian Institution in 1941 before serious weathering had occurred, verified the existence also in the sculpture of *hieroglyphs* above two of the six persons seated around the tree, i.e., symbols which undoubtedly record the actual names of these two persons! This important discovery, of course, opened the possibility of a definite decision as to whether the six persons portrayed here are, in fact, to be identified with the six persons of the Tree of Life episode of the Book of Mormon.

These two “name-glyphs” have now been deciphered. One of them, carved above the old bearded man (i.e., the person corresponding to the prophet Lehi of the Book of Mormon), strangely depicts a great face in profile, emphasizing the jaws or cheek portion; in other words, it may be an indirect or symbolic recording of this person’s name by simply giving its peculiar meaning, that of ‘jaws’ or ‘cheek.’ Now this happens to be the meaning of the ancient Hebrew name “Leh-hee,” which is transliterated in our Old Testament as *Lehi!* (the *i* representing English long *e* in the Romance languages, though this name in English is pronounced “Leehai”). Here, then, is an apparent exact name-agreement with the Book of Mormon episode, which—in view of the correspondence already noted between this person so named and Lehi of the Book of Mormon—cannot easily be explained away as accidental.

A final test of the Book of Mormon identity of the six persons depicted in the Izapa carving is provided by the meaning of the second name-glyph, which is found above the large young man holding the styluslike object (i.e., the person corresponding to Nephi of the Book of Mormon). That is, if this glyph should prove decipherable as a symbol recording the name Nephi, there can be little possibility left that the resemblance between the Izapa scene and the Book of Mormon episode is accidental. In other words, it would practically establish this carving as a portrayal of that episode.

Now this second glyph has been found to be both a *Maya* and an *Egyptian* symbol. The name it records in its Maya use is unknown. But in its Egyptian use it signifies the name Nepri (pronounced “Nepree”) or Nepi (pronounced “Nep-pee”; a shortened form of the name dating from the New Kingdom). Now the latter form, it will be noted, comes very close to the Book of Mormon name Nephi. In fact, it is identical with that name; for it has been shown that *Nepi* was pro-

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praying all the way and said, "Amen," as the door closed.

I turned to Tom, who walked to the window and stood staring at the "guys" waiting below. "Tom," I said, "You don't want the boys to be 'mad,' do you?"

"No, I sure don't. And they will be if . . ."

"If you play basketball today, they'll have more reason to be mad at you than if the game is lost by default." He turned, surprised and skeptical, as I continued, "You're the only friend those boys have who's a member of the Church, aren't you? How will they learn, except from you, that the Gospel can be a real force in a person's life?"

"Let me tell you a story. After you hear it, you make up your own mind. When I was in college in Massachusetts before I joined the Church, I thought my religion was satisfactory. I made a point of getting up early Sunday to go to church, before the other girls were awake. Those Sunday mornings were beautiful and made me feel clean and holy. It never occurred to me that there was any relationship between that happy Sunday morning experience and the rest of my week until I asked one of my friends to go to church with me.

"She said, 'Why should I get up and go to your church? Your religion never interferes with your life. I need my sleep on Sunday morning.'

"You see, Tom, she was telling me that my religion, which I claimed was important to me, did not exert enough power in my life to keep me from doing things of which she disapproved — although she did them, too. She made no claim to

any religion. Do you see the connection? Think what I might have done for her if I'd known the Gospel and had been living it!"

"I guess you might've converted her, huh, Mom, if you'd been converted yourself?"

"Well, at least she would have respected my church. There has to be respect before there can be conversion. That's one big reason why, here in Houston, we have to be strong in our faith."

"And faith without works is dead, like it says in the Bible."

"That's right. James said it; and he also said, ' . . . shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works.' (*James 2:18.*) I tried to show my friend my faith without any works. But now you have a chance to . . ."

"To show the guys what faith is, I guess, or something like that."

"Something just about like that, Tom."

He did not play basketball, and the game was not lost after all. It turned out that it could be postponed. Those other boys may someday have the Gospel preached to them and will have no cause to be "mad" at Tom for not having let them see its power in action. As for Tom, he will go on a mission in two years and will find out more surely how important it is for each member of the Church to live the Gospel. He has decided to become a missionary, just as he decided how best to keep that Sabbath Day holy, just as he is learning to decide how to keep control and move safely along the difficult and dangerous road called "life."

## IZAPA STELA 5 AND THE BOOK OF MORMON (Concluded from page 411.)

nounced with the *p* aspirated, i.e., as "Nep-hee," and in consequence is more correctly transliterated with an *h* following the *p*, i.e., as *Nephi!*

These two name-glyphs, therefore, practically establish the six persons in the Izapa carving as the six of the Book of Mormon episode, and consequently this carving itself as a portrayal of that episode—*apparently the first actual occurrence of Book of Mormon names and the first actual portrayal of a Book of Mormon event so far discovered on an ancient monument.* In other words, this carving constitutes the most important external evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon yet to come forth. (This significance of the carving, it will be noted, is additional to that previously brought out, of interest mainly to archaeologists—the new evidence the carving presents of an Old World origin for the ancient American civilizations, in its Near Eastern-like portrayal of the two personages attending the Tree of Life. Indeed, the additional significance of constituting important evidence for the Book of Mormon tends, of

course, to establish an Old World origin for these civilizations *which was exactly that recorded in the Book of Mormon*; i.e., an origin in three trans-oceanic migrations from the Near East, the earliest from Sumerian Mesopotamia and the two latter from Israelite Palestine, one of the latter led by an ancient Israelite prophet named Lehi, whom quite surely we see portrayed in this carving.)

A full study of this extremely important monument, including the details of decipherment of the two name-glyphs, and identification of elements corresponding to features of Lehi's vision additional to the Tree of Life, such as the "river of water" and the "rod of iron"—as well as photographic and drawing reproductions of the whole Tree of Life scene itself—is available in a publication of the University Archaeological Society (*Stela 5, Izapa, Chiapas, Mexico; a Major Archaeological Discovery of the New World*, price \$2; order from: The University Archaeological Society, c/o Department of Archaeology, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah).