

Moses' Brazen Serpent as It Relates to Serpent Worship in Mesoamerica

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Abstract: This paper shows that the account of Moses' brazen serpent as taught by the Nephite leaders presents parallels to the symbol and name of the Mesoamerican god, "Quetzalcoatl." It further shows that the term *flying*, used in the Nephite but not in the biblical account of the fiery serpent, has parallels in the Old and New Worlds.

Archaeologists and scholars agree there are countless documented instances of serpent worship in varying forms throughout human history. Yet, despite the innumerable varieties of serpent worship, only in Mesoamerica do we find a preponderance of "feathered" serpent worship. Carrasco emphatically states that "there is no doubt that serpent symbolism and more specifically feathered serpent symbolism is spread throughout the architecture of ceremonial centers in Mesoamerica."¹ The God who was represented by statues and pictorial representations of feathered serpents was known as "Quetzalcoatl."

Although the ancient peoples of Mesoamerica worshiped many different gods, the beauty of an indigenous bird so captured their interest that they not only borrowed its name, but used its form as well to represent their principal and most revered God, called "Quetzalcoatl" by the Toltecs and Aztecs, and "Kukulcan" and "Gucumatz" by the Maya.² Native to the

¹ David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 50; see also J. Eric S. Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1986), 121.

² Because these titles refer to the same god, their interpretation—"feathered" or "plumed" serpent—is the same. The Aztec word *quetzal* is the name of a bird and also means "tail feather." The word *coatl* means snake. Similarly the Maya word, *Kukulcan*, is a combination of





highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, and Guatemala, the quetzal is a strikingly beautiful creature with a three-foot long iridescent green tail, crimson breast, and a myriad of other bright colors on its coat.³

Although Quetzalcoatl's origin is clouded in obscurity, the legends, the few pre-Columbian writings extant today, and the early post-Conquest writings contain an abundance of material on this ancient and revered god. These accounts are contradictory and vary widely both on the god's attributes and the details of how he was worshiped,⁴ undoubtedly due to a millennium of digressions from the original concept from the end of the Book of Mormon to the time of the Conquest. However, through all this maze, we find that the Mesoamericans consistently endow Quetzalcoatl with many Christlike attributes, some of which are listed below:

- Quetzalcoatl was the creator of life.⁵
- Quetzalcoatl taught virtue.⁶
- Quetzalcoatl was the greatest Lord of all.⁷

two words, *kukul* meaning "feather" and *can* meaning "snake." In the Quiché Maya name *Gucumatz*, *guc* means "green feathers" and *cumatz* means "serpent." Anne L. Bowes, "The Quetzal," *National Geographic* (January 1969): 141; see also Charles Gallenkamp, *The Riddle and Rediscovery of a Lost Civilization: Maya*, 3d ed. (New York: Penguin, 1987), 165, 118; and Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley, trans., *Popol Vuh* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 78.

³ Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization*, 20. Of interest is the fact that the quetzal bird cannot survive in captivity, for once confined, it ceases to eat and dies. The highly revered quetzal is the national bird of Guatemala. Its currency bears the bird's name.

⁴ This may be due in part to the confusion and intermingling of stories surrounding the rulers (most notably Topiltzin of Tollan or Tula) who adopted for themselves the name of Quetzalcoatl. Legends made each such leader an "Hombre-Dios" (Man-God); Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 88. To further add to the entanglement, the Mesoamericans saw their rulers in some manner as avatars of the spirit or gods. Reality blends into the mystic; see Roberta H. Markman and Peter Markman, *The Flayed God: The Mesoamerican Mythological Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 269.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32; see also Goetz and Morley, *Popol Vuh*, 83.

⁶ Gallenkamp, *The Riddle and Rediscovery of a Lost Civilization: Maya*, 166.

⁷ Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 43.





- Quetzalcoatl had a “long beard and the features of a white man.”⁸

- The Mesoamericans believed Quetzalcoatl would return.⁹

Although at first glance the meaning of the name “Quetzalcoatl” might strike one as a far cry from the concept of the Christian deity, it is quite possible that this depiction could have originated from an experience of the Israelite nation on their journey from Egypt as related in both the Old Testament and the brass plates of Laban. After traveling for approximately thirty-eight years in the desert, the Israelites received the last miracle of their exodus, one that carried with it a most important lesson and symbol. As before, the people rebelled and complained.

And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread.

And the Lord sent *fiery serpents* among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died.

Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people.

And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a *fiery serpent*, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that everyone that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.

And Moses made a *serpent of brass*, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived. (Numbers 21: 5–9; emphasis added)

⁸ T. A. Willard, *Kukulcan: The Bearded Conqueror* (Los Angeles: Murray & Gee, 1941), 159.

⁹ Bernal Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1963); see also Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 48; and Brian M. Fagan, *Kingdoms of Gold: Kingdoms of Jade* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 37; and Adrian Recinos and Delia Goetz, *The Annals of the Cakchizuels* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1953), 40.





But why did God use the word *fiery* in his command, “Make thee a fiery serpent?” Although most Bible scholars concede that the serpents in this area were very colorful, even of a “glowing fiery red color,”¹⁰ there is some disagreement among them as to whether the original Hebrew word for “fiery” referred to the snake’s color or its venomous bite. This paper suggests that it referred to both attributes.

Although it would be presumptuous to speculate on the Lord’s actual reason for using the word *fiery*, we can assume he wanted the serpent to be bold, bright, and colorful in order to draw attention to this powerful symbol. Although the Lord did not specify which material to use, Moses constructed the serpent of brass. Even though it would have been easier and faster to use cloth or wood, brass may have seemed the best choice for portraying a “fiery” aspect.¹¹ One can imagine the dramatic impact the gleaming brass serpent had on the suffering Israelites as Moses carried it aloft, high above his head, the serpent flashing a myriad of piercing fiery colors when the sun shone upon its numerous angles and crevices. Such a spectacle would surely serve to remind the people of the fiery intensity of their snake bites while simultaneously displaying God’s omnipotence, since, as they looked upon it, they were healed.

Interestingly, the brazen serpent was kept by the Israelites for some 500 years, during which time the sacred symbol was devalued into “an object of popular worship in Judah,”¹² until Hezekiah, a righteous King, “brake in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it” (2 Kings 18:4). Even though the Israelites were the Lord’s chosen people, they, having lost sight of its meaning and spiritual symbolism, had degenerated into worshipping the serpent as an idol.

¹⁰ George Bush, *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Numbers* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1868), 313. See also J. Jones et al., *The Old Testament: According to the Authorised Version* (New York: Pott & Young, 1878), Num 21.

¹¹ In the Bible, and in some scholarly interpretations and comments, the metal “brass” is described as vividly colorful; for example, in Ezekiel’s vision, the cherubim “sparkled like the colour of burnished brass” (Ezekiel 1:7).

¹² George B. Gray, *The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old & New Testaments* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1965), 274.





Actually, the five verses above from the book of Numbers comprise only a very brief summary of this important event, which eventually led to this idolatrous serpent worship. The passages contain surprisingly little detail and absolutely no indication of its true significance. A glimpse of its importance is revealed in the third chapter of John, when Jesus tells Nicodemus:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3: 14–15)

Paul also refers briefly to the incident: “Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents” (1 Corinthians 10:9).

Because there are so few references in the Bible, to fully understand the Lord’s lesson, we must turn to the Book of Mormon and the people of Mesoamerica. The written records of the Nephites, which were essential in maintaining their adherence to the Lord’s commandments, consisted of the brass plates of Laban (specified as scripture) as well as their own written histories, some of which were also considered scripture (Alma 18:38). The importance of these written records became apparent when the Mulekites merged with the Nephites. The Mulekites had no written records, their language had become corrupt, and they had even denied their God. The Mulekites “did rejoice exceedingly” (Omni 1:14) because the Nephites had the brass plates. Though the Mulekites apparently outnumbered the Nephites,¹³ the Nephite king became the leader when the groups merged, for the Nephites, because of their reliance on records and record keeping, were strongly united and stable (Omni 1:14–19). In fact, there appears to be a fascination with historical

¹³ The fact that Amaleki would comment that the Mulekites “had become exceedingly numerous” (Omni 1:17) when discovered by Mosiah would infer that the Mulekites were a much larger group. Other scholars have also come to this conclusion. See Rodney Turner, “The Lamanite Mark,” in Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds., *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1989), 143; see also George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Philip C. Reynolds, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1955), 1:509; cf. John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 13–17.





records throughout the entire history of the Nephites. The best example of this is when King Limhi's people and the followers of Alma returned to Zarahemla and were reunited with the main Nephite group. Their first act, filled with emotion, was the reading of each group's records (Mosiah 25:5–9).

With this love for their ancestors and their writings, one can easily understand that in calling the Nephites to repentance, their leaders would often urge them to remember what the Lord had done for their fathers.¹⁴ In the Book of Mormon, the various writers refer to the Lord's dealings with their fathers some seventy-nine times.¹⁵ Thus, it appears that the Nephite leaders were continually reminding their people what had happened to their fathers. As a result, it is natural that the Nephite leaders used and adapted events from the lives of their forefathers for their everyday teachings, including the story of Moses and his brazen serpent, thus keeping the story alive and active among the people. Further, it was common practice to distribute copies of the scriptures among all the Nephites (Alma 63:12; Jacob 7:23; and Alma 14:1), who were continually encouraged by their leaders to read them.¹⁶

Although the brazen serpent event is described five separate times in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 25:20; Alma 33:19–22; 37:46; Helaman 8:14–15),¹⁷ the most significant account is

¹⁴ Reinforcing this concept is an astute work by Louis Midgley, "The Ways of Remembrance," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991), 168–76.

¹⁵ This count is based upon the author's personal research, using the Infobase's computer program, and excludes any Jaredite references since the Jaredites would not have had a record of the brazen serpent episode.

¹⁶ For example, King Benjamin counseled his sons to "remember to search them [the Nephite records] diligently, that ye may profit thereby" (Mosiah 1:7). Also note Alma's exhortation to the poor of the Zoramites, who even in poverty must have had access to the scriptures: "ye ought to search the scriptures" (Alma 33:2).

¹⁷ To comprehend fully the widespread use of this event by the Nephites, we should keep in mind that Mormon (who wanted to communicate emphatically that the Book of Mormon contains only a very small part of the Nephite activities) tells us five times that, in his abridgment, he wrote less than "a hundredth part" of the written record (Jacob 3:13; Mormon 1:5; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the Nephite records may have contained many more references to the brazen serpent account.





where Nephi refers to the event in admonishing his brothers. Note Nephi's use of the word *flying* in his description of the serpent:

And he did straiten them in the wilderness with his rod; for they hardened their hearts, even as ye have; and the Lord straitened them because of their iniquity. He sent fiery *flying* serpents among them; and after they were bitten he prepared a way that they might be healed; and the labor which they had to perform was to look; and because of the simpleness of the way, or the easiness of it, there were many who perished. (1 Nephi 17:41)

In contrast to the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon clearly defines the Lord's lesson, which, as McConkie states, was to "typify Christ and point attention to the salvation which would come because he would be lifted up on the cross."¹⁸

When one compares the biblical and the Book of Mormon accounts of the brazen serpent, one can assume, because of the greater detail contained in the Book of Mormon, that the Book of Mormon source, the brass plates of Laban, which had not undergone the ravages of editing and translations, contained a more accurate account of the brazen serpent event than is set forth in the Bible.¹⁹ As a result, in interpreting the event and its significance, it seems prudent to rely more heavily upon the Book of Mormon account.

It now becomes imperative to explore why the biblical account refers only to "fiery serpents," whereas the Book of Mormon refers to "fiery flying serpents," for the use of the

¹⁸ Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 104; see also Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft 1974), 1:22.

¹⁹ For example, in 1 Nephi 17:41 and Alma 33:20, we find that many of the Israelites would not humble themselves and take the simple step to look and be saved. Action by each individual was required in order to be saved (Numbers 21:9). Although the Israelites prayed "that he take away the serpents from us" (Numbers 21:7), the Lord did not remove the serpents. Instead, he provided a cure which required a showing of faith on the part of each individual. In his wisdom, the Lord does not take away the power of Satan, nor does he eliminate sin and temptation in the world. Instead, the Lord provides each individual with the ability to be shielded from the effects of evil, if and to the extent that such individual has sufficient faith to follow the Lord's guidance.





word *flying* is important in understanding what took place in Mesoamerica. If Joseph Smith had personally authored the Book of Mormon instead of merely translating it, he would have been foolish to interject the term *flying* into the description of Moses' serpent, since the term *flying* is not used in the biblical account of this event. This term does, however, appear later in the Old Testament. In two of his prophecies unrelated to the brazen serpent account, Isaiah uses the phrase "fiery flying serpent" (Isaiah 14:29; 30:6; cf. 2 Nephi 24:29). Since Nephi describes the serpent as not only "fiery," but also "flying," we can theorize the Bible originally depicted a "fiery flying serpent," but somewhere along the way, the term *flying* was changed or omitted as various scribes and editors translated and retranslated the Bible over the centuries.²⁰

This usage of the term *flying* in association with Moses' brazen serpent is indirectly supported by numerous works of modern scholars. For example, Karen Joines notes in her exhaustive study of this subject that to the Hebrew word for serpent used in Numbers "may be attributed wings."²¹ Joines further states that neither "the Revised Standard Version nor the Septuagint translations of the Hebrew Bible has been at great care to make consistent translations of the Hebrew words for

²⁰ One might ask the question why Joseph Smith did not add the word "flying" or other details to this story in his inspired "New Translation" of the Bible. Because of both time constraints and practicality, "most of the passages revised or added by Joseph Smith are of doctrinal significance"; Robert J. Matthews, "Joseph Smith Translation of The Bible (JST)," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:767. In the Old Testament, 96.5% of the verses were left intact, with most of the revision attention given to Genesis (200 revisions) and Exodus (66 revisions), where there were important doctrinal points to be made; Richard P. Howard, *Restoration Scriptures* (Independence, MO: Herald, 1969), 109. George A. Horton, Jr., "Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy," in Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet, eds., *The Joseph Smith Translation* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 1985), 75, also indicates that Numbers received only two changes. Further, the Prophet was apparently never fully finished with all the changes that could have been included as reported in Robert J. Matthews, *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 214.

²¹ Karen R. Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament* (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974), 8. Sturdy also indicates the word is sometimes translated "flying serpents"; John Sturdy, *Numbers* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University, 1976), 148.





serpents.”²² Henry also suggests that the serpents “flew in their faces and poisoned them.”²³

In addition, there are isolated accounts of winged serpents in this area of the desert. Joines quotes Herodotus as believing “this desert to be a haven for flying serpents.”²⁴ Bush, while he does not give the concept credence, does agree that “the popular idea has for some cause invested these serpents with wings . . . [and] it is supposed that the epithet flying was given from their power of leaping to a considerable distance in passing from tree to tree.”²⁵ Perhaps most significant, however, is the analysis by Auerbach: the serpent “was not simply placed upon a pole; this would be sufficiently designated by *makkel* or simply *esf*. Rather, it was connected with the ‘flagstaff.’ ”²⁶ In this manner, the serpent would appear as a flag, as though it were flying.²⁷ If Moses did indeed attach his brass serpent outstretched and perpendicular to his pole, it would comply fully with the description “fiery flying serpent.”

Thus, the connection can be made that Nephi’s use of the term *flying* (and very likely its usage by other Book of Mormon leaders as well) could have been carried over into the later religious beliefs of the Mesoamericans, since we do find in Mesoamerica the application of the term *flying* in association with serpent representations of their God. For example, Carrasco refers to a Mixtec prose source containing stories in which Quetzalcoatl was referred to as “9 Ehecatl” (a calendric name)

²² Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament*, 100.

²³ Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, 4 vols. (New York: Carter & Bros., 1853), 1:543.

²⁴ Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament*, 44.

²⁵ Bush, *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Numbers*, 313.

²⁶ Elias Auerbach, *Moses*, trans. Robert Barchay and Israel Lehman (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1975), 137. Bush, *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Numbers*, 316, also comes to the same conclusion. He states “signifying properly a banner-staff.”

²⁷ Consistent with this concept were the words of the Maya prophet Chilam Balam of Mani: “The raised wooden standard shall come. . . . Our lord comes, Itza! Our elder brother comes, oh men of Tantun. Receive your guests, the bearded men, the men of the east, the bearers of the sign of God, Lord”; Ralph L. Roys, *The Book of the Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 167–68.





or “a flying serpent.”²⁸ Nicholson reports that the Otomis (contemporaries of the Aztecs, the Otomi language being second in importance only to Nahuatl), in one of their annual *veintena* ceremonies honoring Quetzalcoatl, attributed the word *antazhoni*, meaning “Great Flying,” to Quetzalcoatl.²⁹ In his extensive work on native antiquities, Frey Bernardino de Sahagun, one of the early fathers to come to New Spain, in the context of a description of a serpent named after Quetzalcoatl, stated, “And when it flies or descends, a great wind blows. Wherever it goes, it flies.”³⁰ Thompkins also quotes Sejourne’s description that “Teotihuacan was the place where the serpent learned miraculously to fly.”³¹ Another example of a flying serpent can be found in *The Maya*, in which Coe displays a gold disc found at the Sacred Cenote at Chichén Itzá. On the disc is a serpent surrounded by clouds, thus implying a flying serpent.³²

In this connection, it is important to focus upon why the word *quetzal* was selected as the first element in their God’s name, *Quetzalcoatl*. Since the quetzal bird was revered for its magnificent color, beauty, and elusiveness, it inspired awe and reverence and was capable of evoking the image of a “fiery flying serpent” in the minds of its beholders. This perception applied not only to the quetzal’s overall appearance, but also to the bird’s individual attributes. For example, since feathers are the source of a bird’s ability to fly, and since birds are, in fact, distinguished from other creatures by their flying, the “feathered” (or “quetzal”) portion of the name could have easily and naturally

²⁸ Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire*, 28; also, Sylvanus G. Morley and George W. Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 4th ed. (Stanford: Stanford University, 1983), 470, suggest that the two names may refer to the same God.

²⁹ Henry B. Nicholson, “Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico,” in Gordon F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal, eds., *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, 15 vols. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964–76), 10:table 4, example 4.

³⁰ Frey Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson, 12 vols. (Sante Fe, NM: School of American Research and University of Utah, 1963), 11:85.

³¹ Peter, Thompkins, *Mysteries of the Mexican Pyramids* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 388.

³² Michael D. Coe, *The Maya* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 136.





emanated originally from the word “flying” as used by Nephi in the phrase “fiery flying serpents.” Feathers connote flying!

Also, since the term *fiery* was illustrated by Moses' usage of a material which imparted vivid color, the Mesoamerican usage of the quetzal bird's name was a natural choice, since the bird was so brightly colored. With the blazing equatorial sun shining on its crimson breast and its iridescent green three-foot long tail rippling in the wind, the quetzal itself could seem to appear as some type of formidable “fiery flying serpent.”³³

Conclusion

Naming their God after the venerable quetzal bird was certainly a natural and instinctive choice for the Mesoamericans. Further, since they also used the word *coatl*, or *serpent*, their vision of their deity must have embodied attributes symbolized both by this vividly colored flying bird and by serpents. Could it be that this embodiment was actually rooted in a version of Nephi's “fiery flying serpent” that was corrupted over time?

As archaeologists and scholars continue exploring Mesoamerica, it is entirely possible that further facts and analogies may surface in support of this theory. In that case, the innumerable remnants of ancient feathered serpent statues and renderings could, ironically, be viewed as yet one more testament to the Book of Mormon and to Joseph Smith's faithful translation of the Nephite records.

³³ In his *Bird of Life, Bird of Death* (New York: Dell, 1987), 215, Jonathan E. Maslow recounts his quest to find and observe the “resplendent” quetzal, the male bird is described as flying straight down the mountainside, shrieking loudly, and flying in an undulating movement so that the long tail feathers stream and sway behind it “like a flying serpent . . . if snakes could fly.”

