The Jesuit priest Jose de Acosta (1540–1600) spent seventeen years, from 1570 to 1587, in Spanish America, working in areas as widely separated as Peru and Mexico. His book Historia natural y moral de las Indias (1590) is invaluable for Acosta's astute observations of the native cultures of the Americas and the dramatic effects of colonization. It also contains his logical speculations on the origins of the Indians, a portion of which is reprinted below. In these pages, Acosta was first to propose that the Americas had been populated by migration from the Old World.


The reason that inforceth us to yield that the first men of the Indies are come from Europe or Asia, is the testimonie of the holy scripture, which teacheth us plainly that all men came from Adam. We can therefore give no other beginning to those at the Indies, seeing the holy scripture saith, that all beasts and creatures of the earth perished but such as were reserved in the Arke of Noah, for the multiplication and maintenance of their kinde; so as we must necessarily referre the multiplication of all beastes to those which came out of the Arke of Noah, on the mountaines of Ararat, where it staid. And by this means we must seeke out both for men and beastes the way whereby they might passe from the old world to this new.

I conjecture...that the new world, which we call Indies, is not altogether severed and disjoyned from the other world; and to speake my opinion, I have long beleived that the one and the other world are joyned and continued one with another in some part, or at the least are very neere. And yet to this day there is no certaine knowledge of the contrary. For towards the Articke or Northerne Pole all the longitude of the earth is not discovered, and many hold that above Florida the land runnes out very large towards the South, and as they say joynes with the Scithike or German Sea. Others affirme that a Ship sayling in that Sea reported to have seene the coast of Bacalaos [Newfoundland] which stretcheth almost to the confines of Europe. Moreover, no man knowes how farre the land runnes beyond the Cape of Mendocino [in California] in the South sea, but that they affirme it is a great Continent which runnes an infinite length; and returning to the Southerne Pole no man knowes the lands on the other part of the Strait of Magellan. A ship belonging to the Bishoppe of Plasencia, which passed the Strait, reports to have sayled alwayes within sight of land; the like Hernando Lamerio a Pilot doth affirme, who, forced by foule weather, passed two or three degrees above the sayd Strait. So as there is no reason or experience that doth contradict my conceit and opinion, which is, that the whole earth is united and joyned in some part, or at the least the one approcheth neere unto the other. If this be true, as in effect there is some likelyhood, the answere is easy to the doubt we have propounded, how the first Inhabitants could passe to the Indies. For that wee must beleive they could not so conveniently come thither by Sea as travelling by Land, which might be done without consideration in changing by little and little their lands and habitations. Some peopling the lands they found, and others seeking for newe, in time they came to inhabite and people the Indies, with so many nations, people, and tongues as we see....

Some (following Plato’s opinion) affirme that these men parted from-Europe or Affricke to go to that famous and renowned island of Atlantis, and so passed from one island unto another, until they came to the maine land of the Indies....But, to say the truth, I do not so much respect the authoritie of Plato (whom they call Divine), as I will beleive he could write these things of the Atlantis island for a true Historie, the which are but meere fables, seeing hee confesseth that hee learned them of Critias, being a little childe, who, among other songs, sung that of the Atlantis island. But whether that Plato did write it for a true Historie or a fable, for my part I beleive that all which he hath written of this island...cannot be held for true but among children and old folkes.

Others say that the Indians are descended from the Jews; for, commonly you shall see them fearefull, sub-misse, ceremonious, and subtilly in lying. And, moreover, they say their habites are like unto those the Jewes used; for they weare a short coat or waste-coat, and a cloake imbroidered all about; they goe bare-footed, or with soles tied with latchets over the foot. And they say, that it appears by their Histories, as also by their ancient pictures, which represent them in this fashion, that this attire was the ancient habite of the Hebrewes, and that these two kinds of garments, which the Indians onely use, were used by Samson, which the Scripture calleth Tunicam et Syndonem; beeing the same which the Indians terme waste-coat and cloake. But all these conjectures are light, and rather against them then with them; for wee know well, that the Hebrewes used letters, whereof there is no shew among the Indians; they were great lovers of silver, these make no care of it; the Jews, if they were not circumcised, held not themselves for Jewes, and contrariwise the Indians are not at all, neyther did they ever use any ceremonie neere it as many in the East have done. But what reason of conjecture is there in this, seeing the Jewes are so careful to preserve their language and Antiquities, so as in all parts of the world they differ and are known from others, and yet at the Indies alone, they have forgotten their Lineage, their Law, their Ceremonies, their Messiahs; and, finally, their whole Indaisme. And whereas they say, the Indians are feareful cowards, superstitious, and subtill in lying; for the first, it is not common to all, there are some nations among the Barbarians free from these vices, there are some valiant and hardy, there are some blunt and dull of understanding....

It is easier to refute and contradict the false opinions conveied of the Originall of the Indians, then to set downe a true and certaine resolution; for that there is no writing among the Indians, nor any certaine remembrances of their founders; neyther is there any mention made of this new world in their bookses that have knowledge of letters; our Ancients held, that in those parts, there were neyther men, land, nor haven. So as hee should seeme rash and presumptuous, that should thinke to discover the first beginning of the Indians. But we may judge a farre off, by the former discourse, that these Indians came by little and little to this newe world, and that by the helpe and meanes of the neerenesse of lands, or by some navigation; the which seems to me the meanes whereby they came, and not that they prepared any armie to goe thither of purpose; neyther that they have been caried thither by any ship-wracke or tempest, although some of these things may chance in some part of the Indies; for these Regions being so great, as they containe Nations without number, we may beleive, that some came to inhabite after one sort, and some after an other. But in the ende I resolve upon this point, that the true and principall cause to people the
Indies, was, that the lands and limits thereof are joyned and continued in some extremities of the world, or at the least were very neere. And I beleevie it is not many thousand yeeres past since men first inhabited this new world and West Indies, and that the first men that entred, were rather savage men and hunters, then bredde up in civill and well governed Common-weales; and that they came to this new world, having lost their owne land, or being in too great numbers, they were forced of necessitie to seeke some other habitations; the which found, they begane by little and little to plant, having no other law, but some instinct of nature, and that very darke, and some customes remayning of their first Countries. And although they came from Countries well governed, yet is it not incredible to thinke that they had forgotten all through the tract of time and want of use, seeing that in Spaine and Italie we find companies of men, which have nothing but the shape and countenance onely, whereby we may conjecture in what sort this new world grew so barbarous and uncivill.