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Abstract Christenson, in the annual FARMS lecture delivered on 27 February 1991, examined the Maya New Year's harvest festival, perhaps the most important public festival of the year. The festival coincided with the main corn harvest in mid-November and served as the New Year's Day of the solar calendar, when kingship was renewed. Christenson gave particular attention to the symbolic treatments of the evil god Mam; the ritual descent of the king, as representative of the god of life and resurrection, into the underworld; the king's ritual conflict with and defeat of the lords of the underworld (and of death); and the king's triumphant return or resurrection. The Maya used the image of the tree of life in connection with the atonement and resurrection.

Maya Harvest Festivals and the Book of Mormon

**Annual F.A.R.M.S. Lecture
27 February 1991**

Allen J. Christenson

Introduction

Throughout the history of the Maya, who dominated southern Mesoamerica, the most important public festival of the year was timed to coincide with the main corn harvest in mid-November. For the most part, this also served as the New Year's day of the solar calendar, when kingship was renewed. The celebration of this harvest festival has remained remarkably consistent through the centuries due to the extreme conservatism of the Maya people. As a result, study of the festival over time reveals a great deal about the Maya view of the importance of New Year's Day and perhaps hints at concepts which may appear in Book of Mormon events, since most Book of Mormon scholars believe that Nephite and Lamanite history took place in the general area of Mesoamerica.¹

The Harvest Festival and the San Martín Cult

Since the arrival of the Spanish conquerors in the early sixteenth century, the Maya have progressively integrated components of European Catholicism into their own indigenous world view. A notable example of this religious syncretism is the observance of the harvest festival of San Martín by the Tzutujil Maya Indians of Santiago Atitlán, a small village in the Guatemalan highlands.

¹ John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985); F. Richard Hauck, *Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988).

The harvest festival is observed on November 11, the traditional day of the Catholic calendar dedicated to Saint Martin of Tours, a fourth century Roman soldier who suffered imprisonment for becoming a Christian. As a monk, and later as a bishop, Martin was believed to have worked many miracles, including raising the dead.

In Santiago Atitlán, the day of San Martín on November 11 is considered the most important ritual day of the year, even more powerful than Easter or the festival of the village's patron saint. San Martín is considered "King San Martín,"² the ruler of the world, more ancient than any other god or saint, and father to them all³. Although the name of San Martín is venerated by the Indians on this day, the festival bears little resemblance to traditional Christian liturgy and is in fact merely a continuation of ancient Maya ritual. The cult figure worshiped under the name San Martín is a red cloth bundle measuring 24" x 12" which is normally kept in a wooden case to the left of the altar in the shrine of the village's patron saint, San Juan. Despite their importance, the most sacred elements of the San Martín ritual are not performed as a public ceremony. Non-priests know little about them, and for the most part they take place in the dead of night behind closed doors.

On the evening prior to November 11, the San Martín bundle is removed from its case and laid on an altar. The Dance of San Martín is then conducted before it. Two young men wearing jaguar costumes repeatedly paw the backs of two others wearing deer costumes, one of whom is the chief priest of the San Martín cult. The priest wearing the deer costume is finally "killed" by a jaguar and carried back to the altar as a sacrificial offering.

At midnight, the doors and windows are shut and the chosen priest who had been killed as a deer opens the San Martín bundle. It is believed that only at midnight can the bundle be safely opened, otherwise winds would rush out and

² E. Michael Mendelson, "The King, the Traitor, and the Cross: An Interpretation of a Highland Maya Religious Conflict," *Diogenes* 21 (1958): 5.

³ Sandra L. Orellana, *The Tzutujil Mayas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 106; E. Michael Mendelson, "A Guatemalan Sacred Bundle," *Man* 5/58 (August 1958): 123; E. Michael Mendelson, *Las Escándolas de Maximón* (Guatemala: Seminario de Integración Social Guatemalteca, 1965), 95.

devastate the world.⁴ From the bundle he first removes a beige garment with a flamelike design on it. While he puts on this garment, candles are distributed to those present. With the garment on, the priest dances to the four corners of the room in a crucifixionlike pose, with his knees flexed and his arms held out with palms straight and facing inwards. One Indian specifically associated this portion of the dance with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.⁵ The priest then returns the first garment, crosses himself to the four directions, takes out a second garment, and the process is repeated. A third garment is considered the most powerful and is never removed.⁶ Although not specifically mentioned, it may be assumed that the priest represents the god rising from the dead, while dancing with the garments of San Martín. The priest who opens the bundle holds great power in Santiago Atitlán and is believed to hold the power to rise from death. The deceased priests are often referred to as San Martíns and are believed to maintain their power after death.⁷

Standing in opposition to San Martín's power over life and fertility is another idol at Santiago Atitlán called the Mam ("ancient one"; cf. fig. 1). This idol consists of a flat piece of wood with two legs and a head attached to the main trunk. A carved wooden mask is tied around the head to serve as its face, and a cigar is inserted in its mouth. When seen in public, the idol is dressed with several layers of fine clothes. For example, in 1936 this consisted of six shirts, six pairs of pants, numerous sashes, twelve scarves, and two Stetson hats, one worn on top of the other.⁸ There are rumors that the core of the idol contains a smaller, very ancient image.⁹ Due to the zealous guardianship of the idol by the Indians, however, this has never been confirmed. The Mam represents death and the destructive power of the underworld.¹⁰ The jaguars, which symbolically

4 Mendelson, "A Guatemalan Sacred Bundle," 123.

5 Ibid., 125.

6 Ibid., 58.

7 Ibid., 89-90.

8 Erna Fergusson, *Guatemala* (New York: Knopf, 1936), 247.

9 S. K. Lothrop, "Further Notes on Indian Ceremonies in Guatemala," *Indian Notes* 6 (1929): 22; Fergusson, *Guatemala*, 246-47.

10 Barbara Tedlock, *Time and the Highland Maya* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 100-101; J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 134; Mendelson, "A Guatemalan Sacred Bundle," 125.



Figure 1

“kill” the deer during the Dance of San Martín, do so under his authority. His appearance always calls for normal business and activity to cease. But since he is believed to usurp the place of

the village's political leaders as well, these cannot function when he is placed on display.

On the day of the San Martín festival, the Mam is publicly brought out to stand on the north end of the village square to oppose the renewal of life and fertility by the saint. The placement of the shrine to the north is significant. In the cycle of legends regarding the creation of the Mam "at the beginning of time," the tree from which the Mam idol was made was found on the "north edge of the village."¹¹ To the Maya, the north is associated with death, cold winds, the color black, and other expressions of the destructive elements of the universe.

Following the symbolic "resurrection" from death of the priest of San Martín, the Mam idol is taken away and dismantled to "render it harmless."¹² Although the mask is packed away right side up, the head itself is turned backward so as to "leave him without power of speech."¹³ In most other highland Maya areas the figure is torn apart and scattered on the ground. I saw one particularly evil-looking Mam on the outskirts of Sololá thrown onto the highway so that cars would run over it.

The Harvest Festival and the Highland Maya prior to the Conquest

The festival of San Martín is apparently a continuation of ancient harvest rituals observed by the highland Maya of Guatemala before the arrival of the Spanish conquerors. At the time of the Conquest, the Guatemalan Highlands were dominated by the Quiché-Maya. Their supreme god was called Tojil, a god associated with the sun, life-giving rain, and sacrifice.¹⁴ The Maya believed that gods periodically underwent auto-sacrifice, offering themselves as a blood atonement so as to preserve world order in times of crisis. At appropriate times, sacred animals were ritually sacrificed and their skins were worn by priests in imitation of the slain god. The token of the god

¹¹ Orellana, *The Tzutujil Mayas*, 58.

¹² E. Michael Mendelson, "Maximon: An Iconographical Introduction," *Man* 87 (April 1959): 58, 60.

¹³ Mendelson, *Las Escándolas de Maximon*, 123.

¹⁴ *Popol Vuh*, tr. Adrián Recinos, Delia Goetz, and Sylvanus G. Morley (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), 58; Robert M. Carmack, *The Quiché Mayas of Utatlan: The Evolution of a Highland Guatemala Kingdom* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 201.

Tojil was the bloody skin of a deer, slain in his name.¹⁵ The sacred deer skin, wrapped in a bundle and kept hidden in a wooden chest, was called "Our Lord of the Stags" and was venerated as the symbol of power of the Quiché royal family.¹⁶ Sacred bundles of the type worshiped by the Quichés under the name of Tojil were well known by Mesoamerican Indians prior to the Spanish Conquest and directly relate to the bundle of San Martín at Santiago Atitlán.

The temple of Tojil stood at the symbolic center of the Quiché capital of Utatlán, facing east toward the rising sun (cf. fig. 2). Ximénez wrote that certain days were dedicated to the

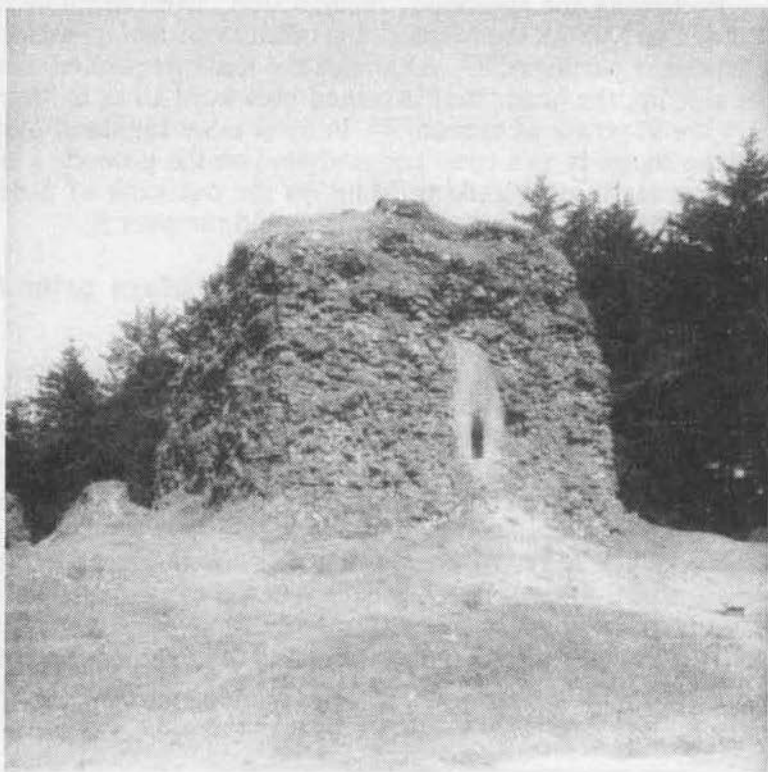


Figure 2

¹⁵ *Popol Vuh*, tr. Adrián Recinos et al., 191-92; Mendelson, "A Guatemalan Sacred Bundle," 124; Carmack, *The Quiché Mayas of Utatlán*, 51; "Historia Quiché de Don Juan de Torres," in Adrián Recinos, *Crónicas Indígenas de Guatemala* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1957), 37.

¹⁶ *Popol Vuh*, tr. Adrián Recinos et al., 205.

festival of Tojil in which special sacrifices were offered in his name.¹⁷ During this festival, people from throughout the region gathered at Utatlán, living in temporary shelters near the temple.¹⁸ Sacred deer were sacrificed by priests mimicking jaguars, and their blood was offered to the four cardinal directions and then finally to the "heart of earth" at the center.¹⁹ As the representative of Tojil on earth, the priest-king of the Quichés reenacted the symbolic death and descent of the god into the underworld, where he was confronted by the lords of death.²⁰

The crisis of witnessing the ritual descent of their legitimate rulers into the underworld must have been extremely frightening. It was believed that death was then given permission to afflict mankind.²¹ Ximénez wrote that because of the ritual passage of these kings through the underworld, the days of the festival were considered "closed" days, when there were no legitimate rulers.²² In the days of the Quiché king Quik'ab, a revolt was staged during the festival of Tojil, in which the king's enemies tried to kill him during the dance of the deer sacrifice, the point at which the king's supernatural powers would be considered weakest.²³

While the king was symbolically in the underworld, carved idols were prepared in the image of underworld gods and ceremonially wrapped in richly decorated mantles and covered with much gold. These images were brought forward and honored as temporary kings, taking the place of the legitimate leaders of the community. As such they were carried through the streets to the accompaniment of music and were given

¹⁷ Fr. Francisco Ximénez, *Historia de la provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala*. Biblioteca "Goathemala," vols. 1-3 (Guatemala: La Sociedad de Geografía e Historia, [1722] 1929), 1:81.

¹⁸ Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apologética historia de las Indias*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, Nos. 105, 106, 1958), 2:148-49.

¹⁹ *Popol Vuh*, tr. Adrián Recinos et al., 89, 194.

²⁰ Carmack, *The Quiché Mayas of Utatlan*, 149; Arthur G. Miller, *Maya Rulers of Time* (Philadelphia: The University Museum, 1986), 35.

²¹ Ximénez, *Historia de la provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala*, 1:84-85.

²² *Ibid.*, 1:101.

²³ Carmack, *The Quiché Mayas of Utatlan*, 36.

offerings.²⁴ As usurpers of political authority, the images represented the reversal of the customary order of society and therefore functioned much as the Mam does in modern highland Maya villages.

Ultimately, the priest-kings ceremonially returned from the underworld in triumph, having defeated the lords of death. The idols of underworld lords were taken away or destroyed, while the victorious kings were confirmed in their reign as representatives of Tojil and danced publicly before the people. A sign was given to the people to assure them that the "great god was in his proper place."²⁵ The rulers were then carried through the streets as saviors of the world and providers of new life.

According to the *Título de Totonicapán*, the Great Dance of Tojil took place in the month of Tziquin K'ij, just prior to the harvest in November.²⁶ The Festival of Tojil also originally marked an ancient New Year's celebration. The Totonicapán document says that the conclusion of the Tojil festival represented the close of the 360-day solar year, and that at that time "lordship" changed, as with the symbolic renewal of rule or the actual accession of a new king.²⁷

When worshipped as the sun, Tojil has been identified as the manifestation of another Quiché Maya god, Jun Junajpu.²⁸ The cycle of legends surrounding Jun Junajpu is found in the *Popol Vuh* and indicates that this god journeyed north along a black road toward the underworld. There he was confronted by a wooden image of the death god. After a number of trials, Jun Junajpu was eventually overcome and sacrificed by the lords of the underworld. The head of Jun Junajpu was then hung in a dead calabash tree, which miraculously bore fruit resembling the head of Jun Junajpu.²⁹ Eventually, the twin sons of Jun Junajpu also journeyed to the underworld where they defeated

²⁴ Ximénez, *Historia de la provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala*, 1:82.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:85.

²⁶ *El Título de Totonicapán*, tr. Robert M. Carmack and James L. Mondloch (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1983), 196, 252; Carmack, *The Quiché Mayas of Utatlan*, 88.

²⁷ Robert M. Carmack, *Quichean Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 295.

²⁸ Carmack, *The Quiché Mayas of Utatlan*, 201, 299.

²⁹ *Popol Vuh*, tr. Adrián Recinos et al., 118-19.

and sacrificed the lords of death, rescued the head of their father, and raised it to the sky where it became the sun.³⁰

The mythological components of this legend were applied in a very practical way to the political life of the kings of highland Guatemala. The ancient Quiché ruling dynasty traced their descent from these gods, as did many other highland Maya groups.³¹ It is known that deceased rulers were equated with Tojil and Jun Junajpu and their bodies were revered in special sepulchres.³² Living rulers were correspondingly identified with the sons of Jun Junajpu.

The Origin of the San Martín Cult following the Spanish Conquest

The question arises, how did the festival of Tojil become associated with that of San Martín? The supremacy of the festival of San Martín cannot be explained by Christian tradition alone, since its observance was rather minor in sixteenth-century Spain. Its significance must therefore be due either to some importance attached to the tradition of the saint by early Maya converts to Christianity, or to coincidence that the day of the saint's festival happened to fall on a day of importance in the ancient Maya calendar. As will be seen, both of these possibilities may be true in the case of the San Martín cult.

Bunzel wrote that San Martín was arbitrarily selected as the patron of the earth's fertility by the first Christian missionaries, thereby replacing the name of an earlier Maya god.³³ I think it unlikely that this association was arbitrary. It is known that the Festival of Tojil, from which the San Martín cult derived, was celebrated in mid-November, at the same time of year as the day of San Martín on November 11. It was therefore easy for the priests at Santiago Atitlán to continue to venerate the old god at

³⁰ Ibid., 163.

³¹ Fr. Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana* (México, D.F.: Editorial Porrúa, 1943), 53; Francisco de Fuentes y Guzmán, *Recordación Florida*, Vol. 9, Biblioteca de Cultura Popular (Guatemala City: Editorial "Jose de Piñeda Ibarra," [1699] 1967), 43, 48.

³² Michael D. Coe, "Death and the Ancient Maya," in E. P. Benson, ed., *Death and the Afterlife in Pre-Columbian America*. Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, Oct. 27, 1973 (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 1975), 91.

³³ Ruth Bunzel, "Chichicastenango," in *American Ethnological Society, Pub. XXII* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1952), 57.

the appropriate time of year by transferring his festival to the day of a Christian saint.

The characteristics of San Martín also made this association logical in the eyes of early Maya converts. With the Spanish Conquest, images of native gods were forcibly replaced by those of Christian saints. These adopted, in the eyes of the Indians, the powers and status of the older Mayan deities. Thomas Gage, who visited Guatemala in the 1630s, wrote that the saints' images were worshiped like ancient idols:

They yield unto [Roman Catholicism], especially to the worshipping of saints' images, because they look upon them as much like unto their forefathers' idols; and secondly, because they see some of them painted with beasts . . . and think verily that those beasts were their familiar spirits. . . . The churches are full of them. . . . Upon such saints' days, the owner of the saint maketh a great feast in the town.³⁴

Over time the cult of the animals came to take precedence over the saint himself. This may explain the curious identification of the god Tojil and his deer-skin bundle with San Martín. San Martín was universally depicted in Christian iconography riding a horse and dividing his cloak to clothe a naked beggar. The Maya have consistently confused horses with deer. When the Spaniards arrived, they mistook the horses they rode as giant deer and therefore named them *quej*, the same word for deer. Even today both animals bear the same name in Maya languages.

Despite the imposition of Christianity on the populace, the Indians felt that at least the form of their ancient traditions had to be maintained so as to effect the regeneration of the earth. The highland Maya quickly adapted the most important aspects of their harvest festival of resurrection into a new Christian context, in this case the cult of San Martín.

Jesus Christ as the supreme God of the conquering Spaniards soon was equated with the ancient gods also. The early Quichés identified Christ with both Tojil and Jun

³⁴ Thomas Gage, *Travels in the New World*, ed. J. Eric S. Thompson (Westport: Greenwood Press, [1648] 1981), 234-5.

Junajpu.³⁵ This process of religious syncretism almost triggered a revolt in Guatemala:

It happened in this kingdom shortly after being conquered that, upon hearing the [life] of Christ which the friars taught them, that there arose a Mexican Indian, a pseudo-prophet. He taught them that Huhapu (Junajpu) was God and that Hununapu (Jun Junajpu) was the son of God; . . . For this cause, there was such a commotion among the Indians that the work was nearly lost, for they came to imagine that our Holy Gospel told them nothing new.³⁶

Jesus Christ was undoubtedly equated with Jun Junajpu because both were sacrificed by their enemies and hung in a cruciform tree before rising from death. This association did not end with the defeat of the Mexican pseudo-prophet. Because of its ancient association with rain, and the resurrection of their god, the cross was adopted as the symbol of the pre-Columbian tree of life.³⁷ Early Christian conquerors and missionaries habitually set up crosses in places of pagan worship to symbolize the victory of the cross over heathenism. Indians apparently attributed the virtues of the defeated gods to the cross itself and gave offerings to it. This explains why modern Maya Indians often paint crosses green or decorate them with foliage. It should be remembered that the San Martín dance also is equated with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Among the Maya, the resurrection of Christ following his crucifixion is often equated with the rising of the sun, similar to the apotheosis of Jun Junajpu as the sun. At Santiago Atitlán, the cross and other Christian images are returned to the church with the rising of the sun on the day following the defeat of the Mam. Many refer to Christ as "Our Father Sun,"³⁸ or "Lord

³⁵ Ximénez, *Historia de la provincia de San Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala*, 1:108.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:57.

³⁷ Robert Redfield and Alfonso Villa Rojas, *Chan Kom—A Maya Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1934] 1962), 110.

³⁸ Sylvanus G. Morley, George W. Brainerd, and Robert J. Sharer, *The Ancient Maya* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 465.

Sun."³⁹ The church monstrances carried during the procession at Santiago Atitlán bear the image of Christ on a cross surrounded by a sunburst pattern.

To the Maya, this curious blending of seemingly disparate beliefs does not seem unnatural. Periodic attempts by the Catholic clergy to suppress pagan elements has been met with great resistance and even violence. On at least two occasions, in 1914 and 1950, Catholic priests conducting Easter Mass at Santiago Atitlán attempted to destroy the Mam image. On both occasions, the priests were driven forcibly out of the village.⁴⁰ For the most part, village priests today tend to wink at "irregularities" in Christian ceremonies as practiced by the Indians, so long as they maintain their central emphasis on Christ and the other Christian saints. This tolerance has resulted in the survival of a surprisingly rich array of beliefs and practices which can be traced to pre-Columbian antecedents.

The Harvest Festival and the Yucatec Maya

The most important chronicler of Yucatec Maya tradition was Father Diego de Landa, a Franciscan who labored in Yucatán immediately after the Conquest and was therefore an eyewitness to Indian rites which were for the most part still untainted by Western influences. His chief native informant was Nachi Cocom, whose bones he later had dug up and cast into the fields on the suspicion that he had practiced pagan rituals after he had been baptized a Christian.⁴¹

In an expanded description of the Uayeb, or New Year's rites, Landa described the image of a demon which he called "the evil one" created during the final "unlucky days" of the year. This idol was carried to the house of the ruler of the village, where he usurps his political authority. The same demon appears often in Yucatec sources as a jaguar deity who is responsible for famine and the death of rulers.⁴²

³⁹ J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 170.

⁴⁰ Lothrop, "Further Notes on Indian Ceremonies in Guatemala," 23; Mendelson, *Las Escándolas de Maximon*, 65.

⁴¹ Fr. Diego de Landa, *Yucatán Before and After the Conquest*, tr. William Gates (New York: Dover, [1566] 1978), iii.

⁴² *The Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, tr. Ralph L. Roys (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 49; *The Codex Pérez and the Book of Chilam Balam of Maní*, tr. Eugene R. Craine and Reginald C. Reindorp (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 87.

The Uayeb New Year's rites are known to have been celebrated in Yucatán long before the Spanish Conquest, as demonstrated by the surviving pre-Columbian Maya hieroglyphic codices (cf. fig. 3). Pages 34-37 of the Madrid Codex



Figure 3

illustrate the Uayeb New Year's rites. Centered within the lower registers are cinerary urns set on the coils of serpents, representing the idea that "the years are closed, or dead, and . . . the ashes of the years rest within them."⁴³ The prefix for the Uayeb glyph may represent the idea of evil, and its presiding deity was the Mam.⁴⁴ To the left of the urn on page 21b is a jaguar, the representative of the underworld lords and harbinger of human sacrifice.

Father Pío Pérez wrote that the Indians of Yucatán referred to the festival at the end of the calendar year as the feast of the god Mam, the same name used for the evil idol at Santiago Atitlán, and said that the days of his reign carried danger of sudden deaths, plagues, and other misfortunes.⁴⁵ López de Cogolludo, who lived in Yucatán during the Seventeenth Century, described the Mam which presided over the Uayeb, or New Year's rites: "They had a wooden (idol) which they . . . placed on a bench over a mat, and [he] was offered things to eat, and other gifts in a festival called Uayeyab, and at the end of the festival, they undressed him and threw the pieces on the ground without giving him any more reverence."⁴⁶

According to Landa's account, while the image of the evil demon sat at the house of the village ruler, the image of the god of life was taken down from its usual place and kept hidden from view. An arch of leaves and branches was set up in connection with this ceremony, associated with the tree of life, or Yaxche.⁴⁷ Landa wrote that the Indians believed that the Yaxche was a tree growing in the underworld beneath which the dead rest. The lord of this underworld realm was called "Hunhau," the lowland Maya form of the Quiché god Junajpu.⁴⁸

⁴³ Maud Oakes, *The Two Crosses of Todos Santos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 103.

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 118.

⁴⁵ John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Dover Publications, [1854] 1969), 28.

⁴⁶ Diego López Cogolludo, *Historia de Yucatán* (México, D.F.: Editorial Academia Literaria, [1688] 1957), 197.

⁴⁷ *The Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, 64, nn. 5-6.

⁴⁸ Fr. Diego de Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, tr. A. M. Tozzer, PMAE papers, Vol. 28 (Cambridge: Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1941), 132; Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 87, 218; Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer, *The Ancient Maya*, 470.

The defeat and descent of Hun Ahau is connected with political kingship, each ruler having descended from this god. According to Kelley, Hun Ahau is in fact equivalent to the patron deity of the Maya kings and a manifestation of the supreme lowland Maya god of life and resurrection, the feathered serpent god Itzamna.⁴⁹ This is confirmed by the Yucatec Maya codices. On page 34b of the Madrid Codex, the disembodied head of Itzamna as god of life rests among the leaves of a tree growing from the central urn of New Year's day. The god of death, seated on a sign for the 360-day year, reaches out to seize the head while the god of sacrifice presides on the other side. The implication is that during the Uayeb days the god of life is sacrificed and his severed head is placed in a tree, just as in the Jun Junajpu myth. The tree of life is also a prominent motif on page 33c of the Dresden Codex, which depicts Itzamna seated within its trunk.

In the *Chilam Balam of Maní*, the standard of Itzamna was the tree of life in the form of a cross:

The Itza (people of Yucatan) will see . . . the sign of the one God, the erect tree which will be shown so that the world will be enlightened. Lords, console yourselves, discord and confusion will be finished, when the bearer of the cross comes to us. In the future, priests everywhere will be enlightened. Mighty Itzamna, your master will come . . . to arrange the day of resurrection.⁵⁰

The cross as a symbol of the tree of life is a major component of the name glyph of Itzamna himself. In the glyphs placed within the horizontal strip of each of the pages dealing with the Uayeb rite in the Madrid Codex, the cross glyph is prominently displayed, representing wind, breath, and life itself.⁵¹

Landa concludes his description of the New Year's rites saying that "once the ceremonies were ended and the evil spirit

⁴⁹ David H. Kelley, "Astronomical Identities of Mesoamerican Gods," *Contributions to Mesoamerican Anthropology*, Pub. 2 (Miami: Institute of Maya Studies, 1980), 58; Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer, *The Ancient Maya*, 473.

⁵⁰ *The Codex Pérez and the Book of Chilam Balam of Maní*, 74; see also Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer, *The Ancient Maya*, 465, 470.

⁵¹ Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 73.

was chased away, according to their mistaken views, they considered the year as a good one."⁵²

The Uayeb New Year's Festival is connected with the month of Xul, which fell in the latter part of October and continued through much of November, when the principal harvest season was observed.⁵³ Xul carried the meaning of "end" in Yucatec Maya, further hinting at an original designation as the end of the calendar year. Xul is also used to represent the sun in the underworld. Deer sacrifices were observed at that time, the deer representing the death of the sun.⁵⁴ The following month is Yaxkin, meaning "new sun," or "new day," as at dawn when the sun reemerges from the underworld.⁵⁵

Classic Maya Architectural Evidences of a November Festival

In tracing the festival of regeneration into the Maya Classic period, from A.D. 300-900, it must be recognized that no codices or eyewitness descriptions of religious ceremonies exist from that period. Nevertheless, the iconography of Classic Maya architecture indicates that virtually the same pantheon of gods was worshiped as at the time of the Spanish Conquest. In the final days of the year, ritual conflict between the lords of the underworld and the king, as representative of the god of life and resurrection, was the predominant motif in the art and architecture of Palenque.

The impressive Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque was built as a funerary monument for Lord Pacal, the ruler of the site from A.D. 615-684.⁵⁶ The elaborately carved lid of the king's sarcophagus depicts the deceased lord lying atop the sun at the critical moment when both sink into the open jaws of the underworld. From the body of Pacal grows a huge cross-shaped tree decorated with foliage, and draped with the body of the two-headed feathered serpent god, Itzamna. His role as a god of resurrection, associated with the underworld tree of life,

⁵² Landa, *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, 142, 153.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 158, nn. 808, 811.

⁵⁴ Marvin Cohodas, "The Iconography of the Panels of the Sun, Cross, and Foliated Cross at Palenque: Part II," *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque, Part 1* (Pebble Beach: The Robert Louis Stevenson School, 1973), 97.

⁵⁵ Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 109-110.

⁵⁶ Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer, *The Ancient Maya*, 123.

has already been mentioned. Pacal's association with this god indicates that the ruler is recapitulating his descent into the underworld to be confronted by the lords of death and sacrifice. The stucco images of these evil lords decorate the walls of the tomb chamber.

A complex of three temples on the southeastern periphery of the site continues this ritual passage of Pacal through the underworld as the personification of Itzamna. On the western side of the complex is the Temple of the Sun, dedicated to the lord of the underworld,⁵⁷ and the setting of the sun. The carved panel within the shrine commemorates the underworld's jaguar patron, as well as sacrifice, warfare, and death. The dead and rigid body of Itzamna rests beneath the night sun, held by lords of the underworld.

The largest of the three temples is the Temple of the Cross, located on the northern edge of the complex. This temple is dedicated to the passage of the sun beneath the earth, with the resultant death of the world and loss of fertility.⁵⁸ The Temple of the Cross was constructed in such a way that only during the months of November to January does the light of the setting sun strike its interior and illuminate the carved panel within (cf. fig. 4). On the left or western side of the panel, Pacal is depicted holding the head of the sun before him. On the right, or eastern side, stands Pacal's son and successor, Chan Bahlum. Between them is the partly skeletized head of the setting sun. A large barren cross-shaped tree grows from this head, and is draped with the partially skeletized body of Itzamna, symbolic of the god hanging on the underworld tree of life.

The piers flanking the entrance to the shrine are also intricately carved. The right pier depicts the principal lord of the underworld as an aged, toothless deity wearing a jaguar pelt cape and a belt buckle shaped into a mat symbol, indicating his authority and lordship.⁵⁹ The iconography of this figure is remarkably similar to the Mam image at Santiago Atitlán, with whom he is identified. His headdress is heavily laden with tobacco leaves and he is smoking a very large cigar.⁶⁰ It is significant that his image appears most prominently in this

57 Ibid., 476.

58 Cohodas, "The Iconography of the Panels," 96.

59 Francis Robiesek, *The Smoking Gods* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 116.

60 Ibid.

temple, as it occupies the north end of the complex, the symbolic location of the entrance into the underworld.

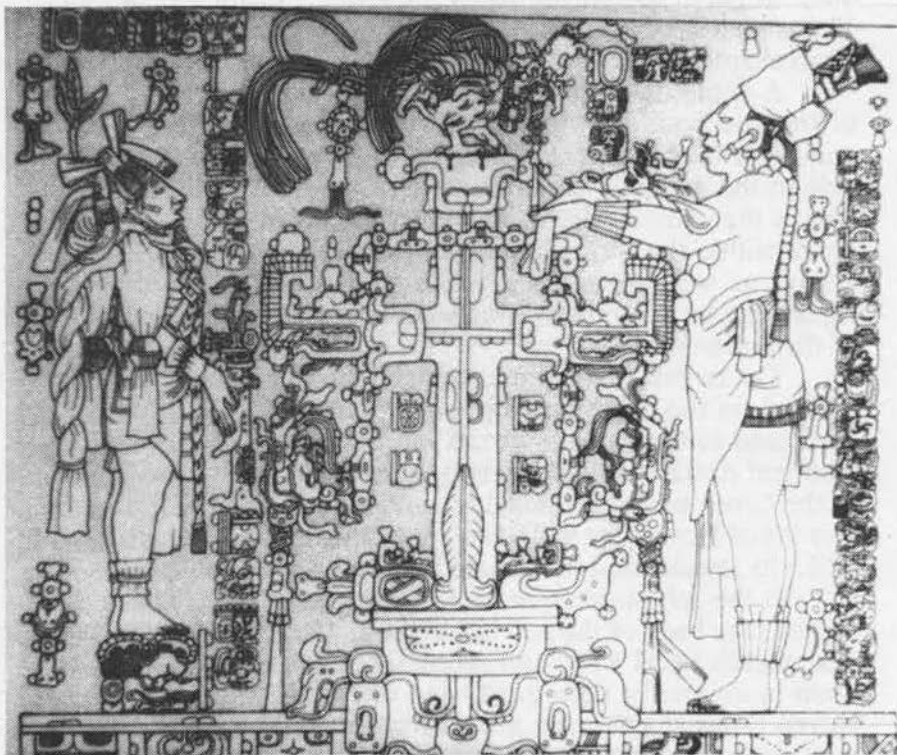


Figure 4

To the east, the direction of rebirth and the rising sun, is the Temple of the Foliated Cross. This temple is dedicated to the manifestation of Itzamna as patron of the various ruling Maya dynasties.⁶¹ The inscribed birth date of this god at the beginning of time is Hun Ahau, which also appears as a name for the god in Maya texts.⁶² The shrine of this temple commemorates the rebirth of the sun and maize from the underworld. It also recognizes the renewal of earthly rule among the living in the guise of Pacal's son, Chan Bahlum. The central panel of the shrine is again dominated by a cross-shaped tree, however it is now laden with disembodied heads nestled in

⁶¹ Cohodas, "The Iconography of the Panels," 95.

⁶² Morley, Brainerd, and Sharer, *The Ancient Maya*, 473.

corn leaf clusters with life signs emanating from their mouths. The rejuvenated sun appears above it. The tree itself is heavy with abundant foliage. The head of Itzamna, from which the tree grows, now is surrounded by corn elements and bears a prominent Kan cross on his forehead, the glyphic symbol of rain and new life.⁶³ The Kan cross is interchangeable with the glyph Yax, indicating completion or newness.⁶⁴ It also signifies the end of one temporal cycle and the beginning of a new one.⁶⁵ The celebration of the renewal of kingship at Palenque therefore must have taken place at New Year's. Cohodas believes that the shrine served as the center of a harvest festival about the time of the autumnal equinox.⁶⁶

The November Festival and Classic Maya Ceramics

The conflict between underworld lords and the god of life is a common motif on Maya funerary vessels buried with important personages, particularly kings. Inscriptions found on these ceramics are believed to have been taken from a long hymn which was sung over the bodies of dead or dying lords, describing the descent of the sons of Jun Junajpu into the underworld.⁶⁷ This hymn was meant to prepare the dead for his passage into the underworld where he, like the sons of Jun Junajpu before him, might overcome death and rise again.

A very early depiction of this conflict may be seen on the Early Classic "Box of God K and L Smoking" from the northern

⁶³ Linda Schele, "Observations on the Cross Motif at Palenque," in Merle Greene Robertson, ed., *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, Part 1 (Pebble Beach: The Robert Louis Stevenson School, 1973), 43; V. Garth Norman, *Izapa Sculpture, Part 1: Album*, Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, No. 30 (Provo: New World Archaeological Foundation, 1973), 140.

⁶⁴ Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 252.

⁶⁵ Cecelia F. Klein, "Post-Classic Mexican Death Imagery as a Sign of Cyclic Completion," in E. P. Benson, ed., *Death and the Afterlife in Pre-Columbian America*. Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, Oct. 27, 1973 (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, 1975), 74.

⁶⁶ Cohodas, "The Iconography of the Panels," 96.

⁶⁷ Michael D. Coe, *The Maya Scribe and His World* (New York: Grolier Club, 1973), 22; Michael D. Coe, *Lords of the Underworld—Masterpieces of Classic Maya Ceramics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 12-13.

Peten (cf. fig. 5).⁶⁸ The left-hand panel on the front of this box depicts the god of life holding a cross-shaped glyph with foliage growing from it. This god is being threatened by the lord of the underworld in the right-hand panel. The iconography of this god is remarkably similar to that seen at Palenque. He is depicted as an aged, hump-backed man smoking a large cigar.



Figure 5

The Mayan vessel known as Grolier 49 also depicts the underworld god on a jaguar throne, wearing a jaguar cloak, and smoking a large cigar.⁶⁹

The vessel known as the "Carved Vase Chocoma Style and God L Seated"⁷⁰ depicts a seated underworld god, smoking his cigar and holding in his right hand the severed head of the life god, who has apparently been recently sacrificed.

⁶⁸ Robiesek, *The Smoking Gods*, 117.

⁶⁹ Coe, *The Maya Scribe*, 107; Coe, *Lords of the Underworld*, 21.

⁷⁰ Grolier 56 in Coe, *The Maya Scribe*, 116.

The finest series of ceramic vessels are those painted in "Codex Style." It is believed that these were decorated by the same priests or scribes who painted the hieroglyphic codices, none of which has survived from the Classic period. All of these Codex Style vessels come from Calakmul in southern Campeche, or sites which were under its control.⁷¹ Calakmul was located furthest north of the important Classic Maya sites, occupying the traditional location of the entrance to the underworld. Its ceramic art therefore placed particular emphasis on underworld themes and the power of its lords.

Perhaps the finest of the vases produced at Calakmul is Grolier 42.⁷² It depicts the lord of the underworld seated on his jaguar throne. Three of the women surrounding him are preparing his wine, probably the powerfully intoxicating balche drink. Facing the jaguar throne, a bound god identified as Jun Junajpu is being beheaded.⁷³

A "World Tree," or tree of life, grows from the decapitated head of the serpentine life god in Princeton 16,⁷⁴ a motif remarkably similar to the depictions of Itzamna on the cross panels at Palenque. The head bears the glyph representing the sun. He also wears the quadripartite headdress indicative of Maya royalty. A serpent winds down the branches of the tree in a manner reminiscent of the directional trees in the Dresden Codex which are associated with the New Year's rites. A jaguar deity, apparently the sacrificer, is seen above and to the right of the tree, with the severed head of the life god on his back.

The Vase of the Falling Lord⁷⁵ depicts the skeletal god of death leading a procession through the underworld carrying a decapitated human head with serpentine features in his right hand. A jaguar follows the death god, presumably the sacrificer. Behind the jaguar is a composite serpent with deer antlers and a head emanating from its mouth and tail, identifiable

⁷¹ Coe, *Lords of the Underworld*, 28.

⁷² Coe, *The Maya Scribe*, 91-92; Coe, *Lords of the Underworld*, 16.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

⁷⁴ Coe, *Lords of the Underworld*, 107.

⁷⁵ Robiesek, *The Smoking Gods*, fig. 166; Jacinto Quirarte, "The Representation of Underworld Processions in Maya Vase Painting: An Iconographic Study," in Norman Hammond and Gordon R. Willey, eds., *Maya Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 144.

as Itzamna.⁷⁶ The glyphic sequence concludes with the Xul Emblem Glyph.⁷⁷ The presence of the Xul glyph may indicate that the scene takes place in the month of Xul, corresponding to the month of November and the end of the calendar year.⁷⁸

Princeton 3 depicts a similar scene with a jaguar of sacrifice grasping the head of Itzamna which has a deer antler growing from it.⁷⁹ Itzamna is often depicted with both deer and serpentine features.

As in the *Popol Vuh*, the defeat and decapitation of the life god at the hands of the lords of the underworld does not go unavenged. Maya ceramic vessels frequently depict the descent of the two youthful sons of Jun Junajpu into the underworld, where their father's head is hung within a tree, and where they ultimately defeat the lords of death.⁸⁰ Grolier 20, a polychrome vase from the Guatemalan highlands, depicts these youthful gods along with two underworld gods around a tree which grows from a disembodied head.⁸¹

The victory of the sons of Jun Junajpu over the underworld lords is dramatically represented on Princeton 10. On this vessel, one of the young gods drags God N from his underworld shell while hiding a knife behind his back ready to sacrifice him.⁸²

The November Festival and Izapan Art

Izapa is an important site situated near the Guatemalan border in the extreme southwestern corner of Mexico in the modern state of Chiapas. Its main period of occupation took place prior to the birth of Christ, in the Late Preclassic period. Despite its early date, its artistic iconography displays a number of elements common to the harvest festivals described in later periods and which seem to have dominated a widespread area of southern Mesoamerica. Fagan writes concerning the period:

⁷⁶ Robiesek, *The Smoking Gods*, 153.

⁷⁷ Quirarte, "The Representation of Underworld Processions," 144.

⁷⁸ Robiesek, *The Smoking Gods*, 120.

⁷⁹ Coe, *Lords of the Underworld*, 28.

⁸⁰ Robiesek, *The Smoking Gods*, 121, 123; Coe, *The Maya Scribe*, 13; Coe, "Death and the Ancient Maya," 97; Coe, *Lords of the Underworld*, 12.

⁸¹ Coe, *The Maya Scribe*, 53.

⁸² Coe, *Lords of the Underworld*, 70.

We believe that the spread of [Izapan Art] at the beginning of the Late Preclassic period in approximately 500-300 B.C. signals the period during which a common religious system and ideology began to unify large areas of Mesoamerica. A powerful priesthood congregated in spectacular ceremonial centers, commemorating potent and widely recognized deities.⁸³

The arrangement of Izapan carved monuments follows a pattern reminiscent of the ancient Mesoamerican ritual calendar, with each stela aligned with topographic features, horizon-line solstice, equinox, and other celestial markers.⁸⁴ The site apparently served as a complex ritual center for the observance of various calendric and agricultural cycles. Lowe believes that the main focus of these rituals was related to the timing of planting and harvesting.⁸⁵

Altar 60, located on the northern margin of Group A at Izapa, is believed to represent the critical endpoint of the calendric cycle.⁸⁶ The altar depicts a deity with a jaguar mask who may be identified with the malignant god of the underworld.⁸⁷

Stela 25 stands in association with this altar (cf. fig. 6). It depicts a sacrificed reptilian beast from whose body grows a tree of life. The body of a double-headed serpent winds around the sacrificed beast as well as a stylized cross held aloft by a human figure standing on the right. The presence of a conch in close approximation with both figures indicates that the scene takes place in the underworld. The double-headed serpent, as well as

⁸³ Fagan, as cited in V. Garth Norman, "San Lorenzo as the Jaredite City of Lib," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* 153 (June 1983): 8.

⁸⁴ Gareth W. Lowe, Thomas A. Lee, Jr., and Eduardo Martínez Espinosa, *Izapa: An Introduction to the Ruins and Monuments*, Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, No. 31 (Provo: New World Archaeological Foundation, 1982), 35, 279.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 35, 271, 317.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁸⁷ V. Garth Norman, *Izapa Sculpture, Part 2: Text*, Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, No. 30 (Provo: New World Archaeological Foundation, 1976), 249; Lowe, Lee, and Espinosa, *Izapa*, 296; Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, 19.



Figure 6

the common motif of a tree sprouting from the body of a sacrificed reptilian beast, identifies the subject of this stela as the

life god Itzamna,⁸⁸ or Jun Junajpu,⁸⁹ both gods of life and resurrection.

Similar depictions of a tree of life sprouting from the head of the god of resurrection are also seen in Izapa Stelae 5, 10, and 27. The trunk of the tree of life depicted on Stela 27 is marked by a prominent Kan cross enclosing the figure of a life deity.⁹⁰ The tree itself has four branches, another cross motif.

In the case of Stela 2, this tree is identifiable as a calabash tree⁹¹ and is flanked by two figures floating above the ground. Both Norman and Lowe associate this scene with the calabash tree of Jun Junajpu in Xibalba, the two raised figures being the "sons" of the tree.⁹²

A large fruit-laden tree of life is the dominant element of Stela 5, the richest of the Izapan monuments in iconographic detail. Lowe believes that this stela was oriented to commemorate the first day of the agricultural or solar year.⁹³ Itzamna as a double-headed earth serpent frames the tree, one head dominating each side of the monument. Beneath this head is a seated figure with a royal parasol held over his head by an attendant, indicating his status as a king, who rules in the name of the life god.⁹⁴ In front of this figure is a book or table in the shape of an Ik profile, the cross-shaped life symbol of Itzamna.⁹⁵ Preclassic Izapa was a well-developed chiefdom and regional center.⁹⁶ As such, much of the ritual iconography of its art served as a basis not only for agricultural ceremonies but also as a renewal of kingship by the earthly representatives of the gods. A royal personage may be seen on Stela 4, wearing a headdress bearing the image of Itzamna on his belt.

The defeat and sacrifice of the underworld lord may be seen in Stela 12, in which a sacrificed jaguar is suspended from the heads of the two-headed serpent god. The sons of Jun Junajpu may be seen below the sacrifice tending a fire.

88 Lowe, Lee, and Espinosa, *Izapa*, 273; Norman, *Izapa Sculpture*, 199.

89 Lowe, Lee, and Espinosa, *Izapa*, 30, 37; Norman, *Izapa Sculpture*, 111.

90 Norman, *Izapa Sculpture*, 140.

91 Norman, *Izapa Sculpture*, 93.

92 Ibid., 94; Lowe, Lee, and Espinosa, *Izapa*, 30, 37.

93 Lowe, Lee, and Espinosa, *Izapa*, 277, 292, 298, 305.

94 Norman, *Izapa Sculpture*, 99.

95 Ibid., 91.

96 Lowe, Lee, and Espinosa, *Izapa*, 313.

Book of Mormon Evidences of a November Festival

It has been shown that throughout the history of the Maya, the most important festival of the calendar year consistently took place in mid-November when the sacrifice and resurrection of their life god was ceremonially reenacted. This festival was apparently tied to the main harvest period as well as New Year's Day and its attendant renewal of kingship power. The question remains, would this season of the year have held any significance for Book of Mormon peoples? The Nephites (Alma 30:3) and many Lamanites (Alma 25:15) kept the law of Moses and were therefore familiar with its required festivals. It is significant in this regard that the Israelite harvest festival, or Feast of Ingathering, is among the most important festivals** of the Israelite calendar year. All Israel was enjoined to gather at Jerusalem for its celebration. Zechariah said that it would be during this festival that the Messiah would come and be declared king (Zechariah 14:16). This Israelite festival complex (which also included Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur) traditionally served as the time when sacrifices were made in similitude of the atoning sacrifice of God, when the New Year was celebrated, and when kings officially took office.

The period from 300-50 B.C., when the Izapan Art style reached its peak of influence, was an exceptionally important one among Book of Mormon cultures. It was precisely at this time, around 200 B.C., that a large group of Nephites under Mosiah became united with the Mulekites at Zarahemla, thus introducing Nephite religious concepts to a new area. It is reasonable that Lehi and his family would continue to observe the Festival of Ingathering and would time it with the period of the harvest.

The key elements of the Festival of Ingathering appear in the account of King Benjamin's address to the combined population of his realm gathered at Zarahemla about 124 B.C. (cf. fig. 7).⁹⁷ The premise of Benjamin's call to the people to assemble was the transfer of kingship to his son, the second Mosiah. Anciently, the inauguration of a new king was the central focus of the New Year's rite, and this appears to have been true in this case. The timing of such an act was critically

97 Cf. John A. Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 2:197-237.

important. Notice that Benjamin had his son assemble the people on a specific day (Mosiah 1:10, 18; 2:9, 28). As John Welch has pointed out, he was not on his deathbed—this

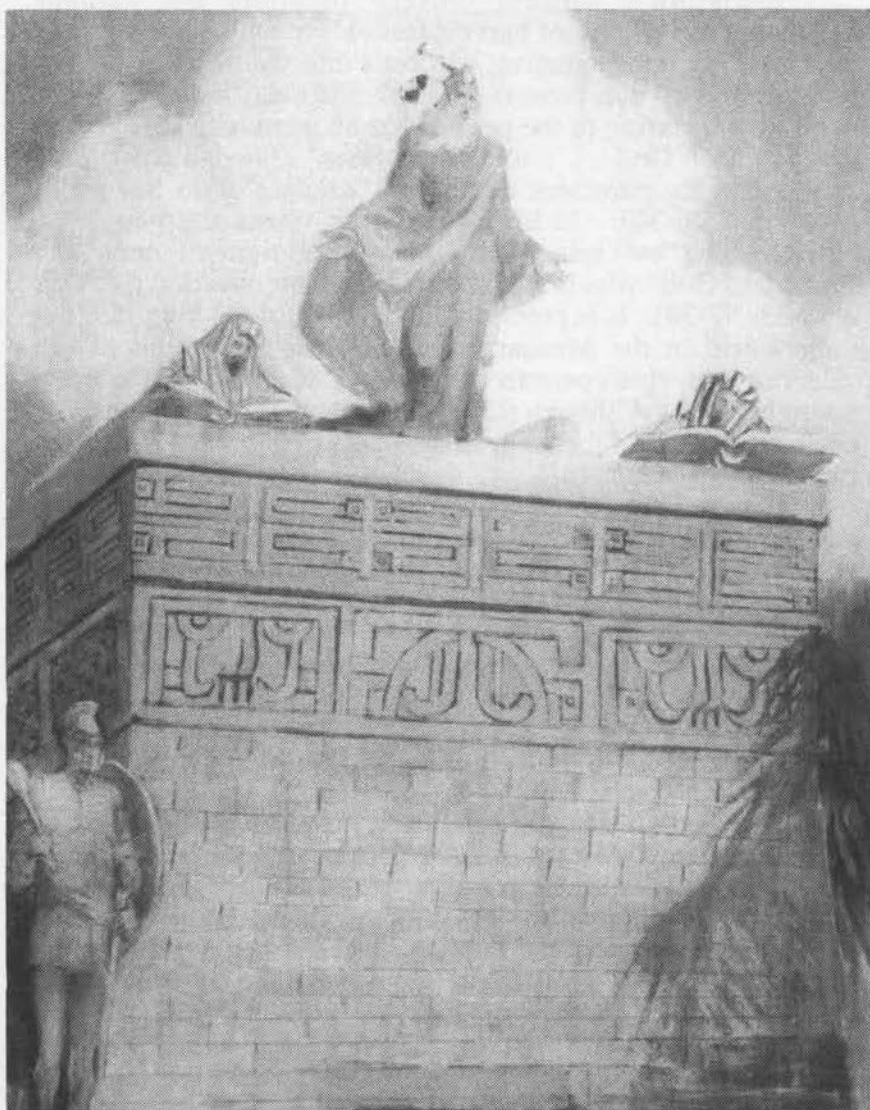


Figure 7

King Benjamin's Farewell Address, by Minerva Teichert
Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Brigham Young University
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gathering having preceded his death by three years—and therefore he must have chosen that day for its ritual importance.⁹⁸

Benjamin's address closely parallels the ancient Mesoamerican pattern of harvest festivals in which the life god, or his earthly representative, descends into the underworld and is overcome by evil powers of death and sacrifice. Benjamin begins by declaring to the people that he intends to unfold "the mysteries of God . . . to [their] view" (Mosiah 2:9). He announces his imminent death and "descent" into the grave (Mosiah 2:26-30). In his absence, he warns the people to beware of the "evil spirit," "the enemy of all righteousness," the "enemy to God" who brings destruction upon mankind (Mosiah 2:32-33, 37-38). It is precisely the descent of the king into the underworld in the Mesoamerican festival at the end of the calendar year which permits the forces of death and evil to reign upon the earth. Although this is usually only a temporary ritual death on the part of the king, the prospect of his actual death was cause for great concern.

Benjamin's announcement of his own impending death and the coming of the "evil spirit" must have had a similar effect on his people. It is at this point that Benjamin shifts the focus from himself as a mortal king to the God of Life, whom he calls their "heavenly king" (Mosiah 2:19). He prophesies that this God would soon "come down from heaven" to experience the trials of temptations, pain, hunger, thirst, fatigue and the shedding of blood for their sakes (Mosiah 3:5-7). At the culmination of these trials, the God of Life was then to die and be crucified (Mosiah 3:9).

The death of the god of life and his placement on a cross, or cross-shaped tree of life, were powerful motifs within Mesoamerican society. The association of the cross with the tree of life was explicit in the Book of Mormon. Both Lehi and Nephi, the founders of the Nephite royal dynasty, were shown a vision of the tree of life. When Nephi asked the meaning of this tree, he was told that it represented the love of God (1 Nephi 11:25). The attendant vision given to Nephi to explain the tree of life motif was a prophecy of the "condescension of God," whereby the sacrificial "Lamb of God" descended from heaven to be slain on a cross for the sins of the world (1 Nephi 11:26-

⁹⁸ John W. Welch, "King Benjamin's Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals," F.A.R.M.S. Preliminary Report, 1985, p. 12.

34). Immediately after his death, Nephi beheld the combined forces of evil brought together to fight against the people of God (1 Nephi 11:34-36).

As in Mesoamerican theology, the death of Jesus Christ as the god of life was associated elsewhere in Book of Mormon prophecy with the sun. Samuel the Lamanite foretold that the birth of Christ would be accompanied by three days of light, as if the sun had not set (Helaman 14:3-4; 3 Nephi 1:15, 19). Samuel then went on to confirm the prophecy of Zenos and Nephi that the crucifixion of Christ would be accompanied by the darkening of the sun (1 Nephi 19:10-11), which would "refuse to give his light" (Helaman 14:20). Great death and destruction occurred as a result (Helaman 14:20-27; 3 Nephi 8:3, 19-23).

Benjamin continued his prophecy by declaring that the death of Jesus Christ was only temporary and that he would rise again after three days (Mosiah 3:10) to bring salvation to his people. The evil spirit would thus be expelled. Benjamin stressed that during his life Jesus Christ would have great power to "cast out devils, or the evil spirits which dwell in the hearts of the children of men" (Mosiah 3:6) and that his atoning blood was the only means of salvation (Mosiah 3:27).

King Benjamin seems particularly to stress God's power over life (Mosiah 2:20-23; 4:6, 22; 5:15). It is interesting that Benjamin should stress that it is Jesus Christ who gives them "breath" (Mosiah 2:20-21). It has been seen that the cross-shaped glyph, meaning breath or wind, was prominently associated with both the tree of life as well as its patron deity Itzamna.

The prophet Nephi, who seems to have set the pattern for many of the religious motifs in the Book of Mormon, identified Christ with the serpent raised upon a staff by Moses (2 Nephi 25:20). This is similar to the recurrent Mesoamerican symbol of the serpentine god Itzamna lifted up into the branches of a cross-shaped tree of life. The persistence of this symbol may be seen in a prophecy given 600 years later by Nephi, the son of Helaman. It was delivered from a tower to a large multitude of people at Zarahemla. In this prophecy, Jesus Christ is again compared to a serpent who will be "lifted up." He further declares that "as many as should look upon that serpent should live, . . . even unto that life which is eternal" (Helaman 8:15). The recurrence of this theme before large congregations of people may imply a formal ritual or reference to such.

There is evidence that the Lamanites also recognized the importance of the New Year in the renewal of kingship. To the Lamanites, the Nephites in the land to the north would have been considered evil adversaries, ripe for destruction. Divinely sanctioned wars were a prominent part of Mayan theology and were often tied to astronomical events or appropriate dates on the ancient calendar.⁹⁹

In this paper it has been shown that as part of their New Year's rites, ancient Maya kings engaged in ritual combat with evil lords who resided in the north. Their legitimacy and the continued survival of their kingdoms depended on the successful defeat of these powerful adversaries. It is therefore no accident that the Lamanite king Amalickiah chose New Year's to engage the Nephites in battle (Alma 51:32–52:1). The Nephite general Teancum took advantage of the situation by slaying Amalickiah on New Year's Eve, precisely when the underworld lords would have been believed to be their strongest. When the Lamanites awoke the following morning, expecting a divinely sanctioned victory, they found instead their king and protector dead. It is no wonder, then, that they fled in terror.¹⁰⁰

Ammoron, the brother of Amalickiah, was chosen to succeed as king of the Lamanites. Undoubtedly the new king was determined to assert his legitimacy and therefore again chose the end of the calendar year to confront the Nephites in the north. Teancum in response again successfully slew the Lamanite king in his sleep. The demoralized Lamanites were thus slaughtered the following day and driven from the land (Alma 62:36–39).

The rivalry between the underworld lords of death and sacrifice, and the god of life, has been traced continuously in time to at least the Late Preclassic period, well into Book of Mormon times. This comprises an important, if not the dominant, theme of contemporary Maya rituals, early Maya literature and codices, the Yucatec New Year's rites, Classic Maya architectural and ceramic art, and Izapan monumental

⁹⁹ F. G. Lounsbury, "Astronomical Knowledge and Its Uses at Bonampak, Mexico," in Anthony F. Aveni, ed., *Archaeoastronomy in the New World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. A. Brent Merrill, "Nephite Captains and Armies," in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 275, and John L. Sorenson, "Seasonality of Warfare," in Ricks and Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 454, 475 n. 3.

stelae. The conflict was dramatized in New Year's festivals, held in November, whose aim was to celebrate the sacrifice and resurrection of life deities, as well as to legitimize**legitimate the earthly authority of Maya rulers.

At a recent seminar on warfare in the Book of Mormon, John Sorenson concluded that military campaigns between the Nephites and Lamanites in the first century B.C. were conducted on a consistent basis in the months immediately preceding and following their New Year's day.¹⁰¹ He further concluded from an exhaustive review of the sources that these campaigns were fought soon after an important annual harvest when provisions would be most plentiful and the people would be less involved with agricultural labors. If the Nephites were subject to the same environment as the native people of Mesoamerica, the Book of Mormon New Year's Day, like that of the Maya, must fall at or slightly after the primary maize harvest in November or December. I therefore propose that the harvest season corresponding to our month of November, so important throughout Mesoamerican history as a New Year marker, also served as such in the Book of Mormon.

According to most scholars, Book of Mormon history took place during the Preclassic period of southern Mesoamerica, a time of widespread cultural interaction throughout the area generally believed to have been the Nephite/Lamanite center of power. Numerous passages in the Book of Mormon point to concepts which would have been familiar to the inhabitants of contemporary Mesoamerica, such as the tree of life, the placement of the life god on a cross, or cross-shaped tree, the association of the death and resurrection of the life god with the movements of the sun, and the renewal of kingship as part of a harvest season New Year's ceremony.

That Nephite and Mesoamerican rulers were familiar with shared religious symbols broadens our understanding of New World scriptural concepts of kingship and resurrection. Many of these motifs, indeed, may have originated in the teachings of Nephite and Lamanite prophets who centered their teachings on Christ as the only true God of life and resurrection. In this light it is appropriate that the ancient Maya of Santiago Atitlán readily adopted Christ as their life God, whose history had long been familiar to their ancient predecessors.

¹⁰¹ Sorenson, "Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerica," 445-99.