

Secret Combinations, Warfare, and Captive Sacrifice in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon

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In some ways, the rise of secret combinations described in the book of Ether and their relation to warfare and the subsequent captivity of kings parallel the Maya traditions and customs relating to myths of origin, secret combinations, sacral warfare, and the capture and sacrifice of divine kings in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.¹ Just as the Jaredite record states that certain patterns of warfare originated with the organization of secret combinations, the Maya derive their customs of ritual warfare from ancestral gods, practices that they place in the third millennium B.C. The fact that some Olmec figurines were reused by the ProtoClassic Maya, who added Maya hieroglyphs dealing with royal accession, indicates some form of continuity with these traditions.²

This basic set of closely related themes, myths, and rituals can be found in various Maya materials, especially in the Quiché Maya sacred book, the *Popol Vuh*; the three famous hieroglyphic panels of the Cross, Foliated Cross, and Sun at Palenque, Chiapas;³ Classic Maya painted ceramic vases;⁴ Mixtec codices; and Maya stone monuments and stelae. Although clearly the sources and diffusion of the mythology of Mesoamerica are very complex, some of the items the Mayan materials discuss may be manifestations in later forms of historical, religious, and ritual events described in the Book of Mormon.

For instance, the *Popol Vuh* contains a fascinating episode centering around Vucub Cakish, his two sons, and Hun Hunahpu and his two famous sons the “hero twins” that may be related to the book of Ether account of the origin of secret combinations in ancient America.⁵ The role of Vucub Cakish from the *Popol Vuh* and that of Akish in the book of Ether are similar. The names, too, are practically identical with the word *cakish* (which means “red feather,” referring to the macaw parrot. Of course, it needs to be determined if *Akish* has any connotations involving feathers or birds). One of the names for Palenque is Xbalanque, one of the “hero twins” of the *Popol Vuh*. Benjamin Urrutia has pointed out that the first portion of the name Xbalanque means “small jaguar” and that the Jaredite name Shiblón or Shiblóm means “lion cub” in Arabic.⁶ The consonants in Xbalan are the same as those in Shiblón, that is, the x in Mayan takes the *sh* sound. The three Palenque hieroglyphic panels date the birth of these lords into the third millennium B.C. The key date for the rebirth of Hun Hunahpu and the birth of his “hero twin” sons is the latter part of the year 2360 B.C., which approximates the time of the Jaredite civilization.⁷ Furthermore, some scenes from the *Popol Vuh* account painted in the Mixtec codices Vienna and Nuttall from southern Mexico depict events and origin myths paralleling the Book of Mormon story of the origin of the Jaredites.

Secret Combinations in the Book of Mormon

The source of secret combinations in the Book of Mormon is given in the following passage: Satan “did plot with Cain, that if he would murder his brother Abel it should not be known unto the world. And he did plot with Cain and his followers from that time forth. And also it is that same being who put it into the hearts of the people to build a tower sufficiently high that they might get to heaven. And it was that same being who led on the people who came from that tower into this land; who spread the works of darkness and abominations over all the face of the land, until he dragged the people down to an entire destruction, and to an everlasting hell” (Helaman 6:27-28).

The following passages provide insights into the structure of secret combinations in the book of Ether:

Now the daughter of Jared being exceedingly expert, and seeing the sorrows of her father, thought to devise a plan whereby she could redeem the kingdom unto her father. Now the daughter of Jared was exceedingly fair. And it came to pass that she did talk with her father, and said unto him: Whereby hath my father so much sorrow? Hath he not read the record which our fathers brought across the great deep? Behold, is there not an account concerning them of old, that they by their secret plans did obtain kingdoms and great glory? And now, therefore, let my father send for Akish, the son of Kimnor; and behold, I am fair, and I will dance before him, and I will please him, that he will desire me to wife; wherefore if he shall desire of thee that ye shall give unto him me to wife, then shall ye say: I will give her if ye will bring unto me the head of my father, the king.... And Jared said unto him [Akish]: I will give her unto you, if ye will bring unto me the head of my father, the king. And it came to pass that Akish gathered in unto the house of Jared all his kinsfolk, and said unto them: Will ye swear unto me that ye will be faithful unto me in the thing which I shall desire of you? And it came to pass that they all sware unto him, by the God of heaven, and also by the heavens, and also by the earth, and by their heads, that whoso should vary from the assistance which Akish desired should lose his head; and whoso should divulge whatsoever thing Akish made known unto them, the same should lose his life. And it came to pass that thus they did agree with Akish. And Akish did administer unto them the oaths which were given by them of old who also sought power, which had been handed down even from Cain, who was a murderer from the beginning (Ether 8:9-10, 12-15).

Therefore, behold, it came to pass that because of the secret combinations of Akish and his friends, behold, they did overthrow the kingdom of Omer.... And it came to pass that Jared was anointed king over the people, by the hand of wickedness; and he gave unto Akish his daughter to wife. And it came to pass that Akish sought the life of his father-in-law; and he applied unto those whom he had sworn by the oath of the ancients, and they obtained the head of his father-in-law, as he sat upon his throne, giving audience to his people. For so great had been the spreading of this wicked and secret society that it had corrupted the hearts of all the people; therefore Jared was murdered upon his throne, and Akish reigned in his stead.... Now the people of Akish were desirous for gain, even as Akish was desirous for power; wherefore, the sons of Akish did offer them money, by which means they drew away the more part of the people after them. And there began to be a war between the sons of Akish and Akish, which lasted for the space of many years, yea, unto the destruction of nearly all the people of the kingdom, yea, even all, save it were thirty souls, and they who fled with the house of Omer (Ether 9:1, 4-6, 11-12).

Cycles of prosperity followed by periods of hard times characterize subsequent Jaredite history. Secret combinations appear to follow the same pattern, with their prominence during prosperous times and their decline during hard times (see Ether 9:1, 26; 10:33; 11:15, 22; 13:18; 14:10). The Jaredite history also reveals the custom of beheading the king or those members of the secret combinations who divulged secrets (see Ether 8:10, 12, 14; 9:5; 15:30-31). Another well-documented Jaredite custom was the tradition of capturing the reigning king and holding him in captivity for long periods of time, sometimes for the remainder of his life (see Ether 7:7; 8:3-4; 9:7; 10:14, 30-31; 11:9, 18-19, 23).

Secret Societies in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica

Secret societies in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica (in which the jaguar was the totemic guardian) were concerned initially with obtaining political power through warfare and obtaining economic gain by secrecy, deceit, and assassination, with the addition of later elements of open warfare resulting in the capture of enemy kings. Mexican artist and writer Miguel Covarrubias describes the nature of secret societies in Mesoamerica as follows:

In those days the ancient jaguar cult prevailed throughout southern Mexico and in Central America, superimposed upon the formal, official Indian religion. After the Conquest it took the form of politico-religious secret societies of people who had the jaguar as beast-kin or totemic guardian. These societies were called *nahualistas*, from *nawal*, totem. The word *nawal* or *nahual* is today the name of a sort of werewolf, a weretiger, to frighten children who won't go to sleep. The *nahualistas* were much like criminal secret societies of the African Tigermen. To quote Sahugun ... , "People like assassins, daring and accustomed to kill, they carried on their persons pieces of jaguar skin, of the forehead and chest, and the tip of the tail, the claws, the canines, and the lips to make them powerful, brave, and fearsome." Chieftains who wanted to be courageous ate jaguar flesh roasted or boiled. It was used as a cure for insanity, for fevers, and "to cool off the temptations of the flesh."

In ancient times the jaguar was an earth god, symbol of the interior of the earth and of the night, of darkness, because jaguars were believed to swallow the sun and cause eclipses. He was the god of caves, the dark interior of mountains, the "Atlantean god of earthquakes, who supported the world upon his shoulders." As such he was worshipped throughout southern Mexico and particularly around Tehuantepec. The Maya of Chiapas called him *Uotan*, "Heart," "Innermost"; the Mexicans knew him as *Tepeyollotl*, "Heart of the Mountain," "Heart of the Land," and worshipped him at second hand, having acquired him along with the religious magic calendar from the tropical south, where he ruled over the third week as an ominous, unlucky sign.⁸

There are numerous parallels between secret societies found in many parts of the world, as Sorenson notes,⁹ but often because of their secret nature very little is known about them. That secret societies did exist in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and that they parallel to a certain degree those found in the book of Ether in some respects is nonetheless certain.

Maya Warfare and Jaredite Parallels

Two general aims of Maya warfare were the consolidation of rule and territorial expansion. Marriages between two dynasties or the obtaining of oaths of allegiance from other lords or chiefs often consolidated rulership. If marriage alliances and subservient oath swearing did not work, then warfare was the answer. These traditions are similar to the wars fought between Akish and his sons, as found in the Book of Mormon (see Ether 9:12).

A Late Classic Maya example (between A.D. 726 and 740) of territorial expansion by means of warfare comes from the site of Dos Pilas, Guatemala, on one of the tributaries of the Usumacinta River. The ruler of Dos Pilas conquered several of the neighboring kings and created a territorial state that lasted only until the conquering king's death. Then his successor was defeated and the expanded kingdom collapsed.¹⁰

Three examples of this type of territorial expansion will be described from the book of Ether:

After the space of many years, Morianton, (he being a descendant of Riplakish) gathered together an army of outcasts, and went forth and gave battle unto the people; and he gained power over many cities; and the war became exceedingly sore, and did last for the space of many years; and he did gain power over all the land, and did establish himself over all the land....

There arose a rebellion among the people, because of that secret combination which was built up to get power and gain; and there arose a mighty man among them in iniquity, and gave battle unto Moron, in

which he did overthrow the half of the kingdom; and he did maintain the half of the kingdom for many years. And it came to pass that Moron did overthrow him, and did obtain the kingdom again.

And it came to pass that there arose another mighty man; and he was a descendant of the brother of Jared. And it came to pass that he did overthrow Moron, and obtain the kingdom; wherefore, Moron dwelt in captivity all the remainder of his days; and he begat Coriantor. And it came to pass that Coriantor dwelt in captivity all his days (Ether 11:9, 15-19).

Most of the Late Classic battles were fought just before a king was to accede to the throne. Thus two bearers carried the victorious king in a sedan chair at the time of his accession to the throne to witness the beheading of a captured king.¹¹

Captive Sacrifice of Kings

From the 125 monuments known at the Mayan site of Yaxchilan on the west bank of the Usumacinta River in the state of Chiapas, Mexico,¹² it is possible to describe many details concerning Maya kings and ritual warfare.¹³ We know, for instance, that the public dressing of the king was supervised by his wife. The king, in preparing for warfare, would dress in emblems of the central Mexican god Tlaloc, the Maya equivalent of Chac-Xib-Chac. Some Late Classic rulers at Yaxchilan were outsiders, hence the Tlaloc emblems. Items from the jaguar were part of the ceremonial dressing of the king. The gods of the Maya required blood-letting from many people, especially the shedding of the king's blood. Hence, on the same day as the ceremonial dressing of the king, a battle would be fought with some neighboring king. One of these kings must be captured. The captured king would be stripped of his clothing, bound, and often mutilated. This scene was followed by various blood-letting rituals involving many prominent priests and members of royalty. On the same day as the battle, or soon thereafter, the victorious king went through a ritual exchange of a jaguar paw with one of his *cahals* (a governor or subchief under his authority).

The fate of the captured king was usually horrible. He would be displayed publicly and stripped and bound on the temple stairway of the victorious king. Then he would be displayed in front of the victorious king's throne, at the feet of his captors. Some captured kings were immediately mutilated by pulling out their fingernails, cutting off the ends of their fingers, or pulling their teeth.¹⁴ Scalping, heart sacrifice, beheading, and disembowelment¹⁵ were other possible fates of the captured king. However, in some cases the captured king was kept in captivity for several years, as were many in Jaredite times, but most were ultimately tortured and killed.¹⁶ In time, the ritual killing of the captured kings was tied to the sacred 260-day calendar, the planet Venus, and the ritual ball game (see appendix). Captured kings could be killed in more than one way, but decapitation, symbolic of certain astronomical events, was the main form of killing. As David Kelley notes, "It has been clear to all serious students of Mesoamerican culture that there was an intimate relationship between astronomical knowledge, the calendar, and religious beliefs and rituals."¹⁷

All this suggests that Jaredite secret combinations, warfare, and capture of kings have numerous parallels that survived among the Maya for many generations. Though the forms of their rituals have changed, certain elements of rituals in Maya culture have remained since Olmec times (presumably the time of the Jaredites) even to the present day. With relatively few written records from Olmec times extant, a more exhaustive comparison is difficult at present.

Appendix: Ritual Ball Game

Detailed pictorial and hieroglyphic evidence from the Maya site of Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico,¹⁸ demonstrates that a prime time for ritual warfare was at the first appearance of the planet Venus as it emerged from either superior or inferior conjunction as either the Evening or Morning Star. Successful warfare was thought to depend upon the support of the gods of the planet Venus. Mayans usually initiated fighting on the last days of either the superior or inferior conjunction. This timing was important so that the ritual beheading of the captured king could take place in the ritual ball game at the time of the appearance of the planet Venus.¹⁹

This ritual ball game is representative of the earliest myths and legends of the Maya. In the *Popol Vuh*, the ritual drama of the brothers Hun Hunahpu (One Flower) and Vucub Hunahpu (Seven Flower) has its setting during the “dry season” when the two brothers are invited to the underworld of Xibalba for a ritual ball game with the lords of the dead. The brothers lose the ball game and are decapitated. Later during the “rainy season,” the twin sons of Hun Hunahpu are also invited to the underworld for a ritual ball game with the lords of Xibalba. However, in the ball game, the “hero twins” defeat the lords of Xibalba and kill them. These sets of brothers have cosmic associations with the Sun, Moon, and the planet Venus.²⁰

Certainly by Middle Classic times (A.D. 400-700), the *Popol Vuh* drama had developed to the point that the brothers Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu have an intricate involvement in the sophisticated calendars of Mesoamerica. Kelley has demonstrated that the date 1 Ahau (1 Flower) 13 Muan occurs at the end of a calendar round of fifty-two years during the dry season, at the superior conjunction of the planet Venus, and that the same date occurs at the end of a 104-year cycle during the rainy season, when the planet Venus is in inferior conjunction at the autumnal equinox.²¹ When the date 1 Ahau 13 Muan occurs at the autumnal equinox, it represents One Flower as the corn god Cinteotl ready for rebirth at the midpoint of the inferior conjunction of Venus. Significantly, 240 days later the other brother of the drama, Vucub Hunahpu (Seven Flower) is descending into the underworld at the superior conjunction of Venus.

When Hun Hunahpu (One Flower) descended into the underworld during the dry season and was defeated in the ritual ball game by the lords of Xibalba, he was decapitated. His head was hung in a calabash tree, and later he was reborn during the rainy season as the corn god Cinteotl mentioned above.

Note that all the lords and gods involved in the underworld ball games and sacrifices have names in the 260-day ritual calendar. In fact, Zipacna, one of the sons of Vucub Cakish, has the calendar name One Crocodile. In the Mixtec codices One Crocodile is married to Thirteen Flower, and his calendar name is the first position in the ritual calendar and his wife’s calendar name represents the last position. Obviously Zipacna and his wife have fundamental connections with the ritual calendar. Thus the rituals were tied closely to the calendar since early times.

During the Classic period of Mesoamerica, there are several examples of captured kings (after playing in the ritual ball game) being taken to a temple and bound in the shape of a rubber ball and rolled down the temple steps to their death.²² Then the captive king would be decapitated, and often his head would be coated with rubber and used as the ball in future ball games. Perhaps the curious Olmec monument from coastal Guatemala that shows the bodies of two individuals bound together into the shape of a ball reflects an early stage of this ritual ball game.²³

The interrelationships between ritual and warfare in Maya culture suggest that being in harmony with the universe was of prime importance. Thus, the timing of warfare and capture of kings with the sacred 260-day calendar suggests that those kings seeking to gain power and control sought to be in harmony with the universe at the time of their accession.

Notes

1. For a general introduction to Mesoamerican secret societies, see John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985), 300-309.
2. Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (New York: George Braziller, 1986), 119.
3. Esther Pasztory, ed., *Middle Classic Mesoamerica: A. D. 400-700* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 129.
4. Schele and Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, 119, 127.
5. See *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiche Maya*, trs. Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), 93-99.
6. Benjamin Urrutia, "Shiblon, Coriantumr, and the Jade Jaguars," *Proceedings of the SEHA* 150 (1982): 1-3.
7. Schele and Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, 60 n. 53.
8. Miguel Covarrubias, *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (New York: Knopf, 1947), 77-78.
9. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 300-309.
10. See Stephen D. Houston and Peter Mathews, *The Dynastic Sequence of Dos Pilas, Guatemala* (San Francisco: Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, 1985); Schele and Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, 250.
11. See the Late Pre-Classic Stela 21 at Izapa, Chiapas, Mexico.
12. This site was occupied from Late Pre-Classic times through the Late Classic period (ca. 300 B.C. to A.D. 900). Most of the huge site was built during the Late Classic period.
13. See Schele and Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, 209-39.
14. Compare this parallel to Vucub Cakish in the *Popol Vuh* (see text accompanying notes 5-7).
15. Compare the Middle Pre-Classic Monument 3 at San Jose Mogote, Oaxaca, Mexico, dated to about 700 B.C.
16. Schele and Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, 14-15, 103-31, 175-207, 209-40.
17. David H. Kelley, "Astronomical Identities of Mesoamerican Gods," *Archaeoastronomy*, supplement no. 2, to *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 11 (1980): S1.
18. Floyd 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).
19. Pasztory, *Middle Classic Mesoamerica*, 130, 138-39.

20. Ibid.

21. Kelley, "Astronomical Identities of Mesoamerican Gods," S19, S26–S28.

22. Marvin Cohadas, "Diverse Architectural Styles and the Ball Game Cult: The Late Middle Classic Period in Yucatan," in Pasztory, *Middle Classic Mesoamerica*, 86-107; Cohadas, "The Symbolism and Ritual Function of the Middle Classic Ball Game in Mesoamerica," *American Indian Quarterly* 2/2 (1975): 99-130; cf. Schele and Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, 241-64.

23. A couple of Early Classic scenes of ritual offering of decapitated human heads come from the lowland Maya and the Zoque region of Chiapas, Mexico. The first scene from the lowland Maya is from an unspecified site, and the second scene is from Mirador, Chiapas; see Cohadas, "The Symbolism and Ritual Function," 99-100, who dates the ritual ball game to Olmec times.