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## Votan, The Culture-Hero of the Mayas

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**Abstract:** Points out “remarkable” similarities between the Book of Mormon and the Popol Vuh, relating it to the Nephites, Mulekites, Jaredites, and various geographical locations from Book of Mormon. Compares the river Sid to the Rio Usumasinta and Zarahemla to the ruins of Palenque.

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VOTAN, THE CULTURE-HERO OF THE MAYAS.

BY G. M. O.

IN the year 1857, in the city of Vienna, a book now generally known under the title of *Popol Vuh* (national book) was first placed before the public in its modern translation, under the following heading: "A History of the Origin of the Indians of the Province of Guatemala, Translated from the Quiche Language by R. P. F. Francisco Ximenez," etc.

Dr. Scherzer, who prefaces the modern work with an introduction, states that the learned and truthful Dominican Father, Francisco Ximenez, made his translation in the early part of the eighteenth century, while filling the office of curate in a little Indian town in the mountains of Guatemala. He left many manuscripts relating to the Indians and their history, some of them containing severe strictures on the barbarous treatment inflicted by the colonial authorities upon the natives, which caused a partial destruction and total suppression of his writings. What remained of them lay for a long time hidden in an obscure corner of a Guatemalan convent, and eventually, during one of the numerous revolutions and religious suppressions, got into the library of San Carlos (Guatemala). It was here discovered by Dr. Scherzer, in June, 1853, and carefully copied.

According to Father Ximenez, the book is a literal translation or copy of an original book, written by one or more Quiches in the Quiche language, in Roman letters, after the Christians had occupied Guatemala, to replace the original *Popol Vuh*, or national book. The manuscript contained the original Quiche text, and the Spanish curate's translation. Ximenez discovered the document in the latter part of the seventeenth century.

The learned Abbe, Brasseur de Bourbourg, dissatisfied with the translation, settled himself, in 1860, among the Quiches, and, helped by the natives and his own practical knowledge of the language, he elaborated a new and literal translation which was published in Paris, in 1861.

From this and other important works relating to the ancient Americans, written by Bourbourg, whose indefatigable researches and labors deserve the greatest praise, we are indebted for much of our knowledge relating to the American culture-hero and voyager, Votan. "By some writers this early colonizer is said to have been a descendant of Noah, and to have assisted at the building of the Tower of Babel. After the confusion of tongues he led a portion of the dispersed people to America. There he established the kingdom of Nibalba, and built the city of Palenque." (Bancroft, *Native Races*, Vol. 5, 27.)

A book written in the Quiche language was in the possession of and burned by the bishop of Chiapas (Nunez de la Vega) in 1691. Before destroying the manuscript, however, he published extracts from it, and previous to the burning Ordonez y Aguiar obtained a copy of it, written in Latin. Dr. Paul Felix Cabrera also, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, saw and described the document, at that time in the possession of Ordonez, a native and resident of Chiapas. The book, or manuscript, purports to be a copy of a work written by Votan, entitled "Proof that I am Culebra" (a snake). The manuscript, according to Cabrera, recorded Votan's arrival with seven families in the country now known as Yucatan. It

appears he (Votan) made other voyages to and from the old world. Returning from one of these voyages, he found that other families had joined his colony, and recognized in them the same origin as his own, that is, of the Culebras. He speaks of the place where he built the first town, named Tzequil, and having taught the people who had joined his colony refinement of manners in regard to their eating, etc., they in return taught him the knowledge of God and of His worship. Cabrera, from Votan's expression, as given in his book, is the same as *hivim*, or *girim*, the Phœnician word for snake, and refers to the Hivites, descendants of Heth, son of Canaan. Hence the expression, "I am a Chivim" means "I am a Hivite."

Ordonez says Votan proceeded to America by divine command and apportioned out the land, or laid the foundation of civilization. He founded the city of Nachan, or Palenque, and made four voyages to his former home. Returning from one of those visits, he found several people had arrived at Palenque, and in them he recognized his own nationality. He showed them many favors, and in return they made him a ruler, and his city—Nachan (city of the serpents) so called from his own name, soon became the center of a great empire in what is now called the Usumasinta region.

Bancroft, in summing up the traditions relating to Votan, says (Vol. 5, p. 159), he was a civilizer, a law-giver and introducer of the Maya culture. He came by sea from the east. From whence he started, or over the number of his visits, it is not necessary to indulge in speculation. His reported acts in America, where he came to civilize, were the dividing or apportioning of the lands among the people; their instruction in the new institutions they were required to adopt; the building of a great city, Nachan, afterwards the metropolis of his own empire; the reception of a new band of disciples of his own race, who were allowed to share in the success of the enterprise, with other minor enterprises. He finally wrote a "book," in which was inscribed a complete record of all he had done, with a defense or proof of his claims to be considered one of the Chanes, or serpents.

The name Tzequils, applied to Votan's followers by the aborigines, or families who joined him after his arrival, is said to mean, "men with petticoats," from the peculiar dress worn by the new-comers.

Bancroft, in referring to the names Chanes, or serpents, and Nachan, or city of serpents, says it is of considerable historical importance when it is noted that they are exact equivalents of Culhuas and Culhuacan, found so prevalent in the Nahua traditions of the north.

At the time of Cabrera's visit, Ordonez was engaged in writing an elaborate "History of Heaven and Earth," a work, which, as the learned doctor predicted, would astonish the world. But the manuscript was never published. The historical portion was lost, and only a few fragments or copies have fallen into Bourbourg's hands.

Ordonez was familiar with the Tzendal language and ancient monuments of his native state. Devoted to antiquarian researches, he had excellent opportunities to listen to and record traditions of his ancestors' greatness. His lost history related the progress of those ancestors "from Chaldea, immediately after the confusion of tongues." "The ancient power whose center was in Chiapas extended north-east and into Yucatan."

The personage whose name appears first in the Maya tradition in this dissertation is Zamna, who taught the people writing (the hieroglyphic alphabet), and gave a name to each

locality in Yucatan. "His role, so far as anything is known of it, was precisely the same as that of Votan, in Chiapas. (Baneroft, Vol. 5, p. 224.)

A prevalent opinion among the Mayas at the time of the conquest was that Yucatan was settled in ancient times by two races or colonies, *one from the east, the other from the west*, and that the migration from the east preceeded that from the west by many centuries. Cogalludo concludes that the colony from the east was the first and most numerous, because of the spread of the Maya language and Maya names of places throughout the peninsula. Other writers infer that the first and great colony came from the west.

The tradition, vague as it is, makes Zanna and his followers come from the east, and is identical with that of Votan. Zanna was the first temporal and religious leader, the civilizer and high priest and law giver, who introduced and organized Maya culture. He was accompanied, like Votan, by a band of priests, artisans and soldiers. He died at an advanced age and was buried at Izamal, a city supposed to have been at that time near the sea-shore, and named for him—probably founded by him. Here his followers erected a sacred temple in honor of his memory, which was for many years the favorite shrine for pilgrims.

The Nahuatl nations, whose colonies extended north-westward from this Votanite center, have records and traditions similar to and as complicated as those of the Mayas and Tzendals.

Sahagun, justly esteemed one of the best authorities, says: "Countless years ago the first settlers came in ships, by sea, from the east. They had with them their wise men and prophets."

The first homes of these colonizers are located by Sahagun in the province of Guatemala. The arrival of Guematz and his companions and their settlements somewhere near the Usumasinta river agrees with the founding of Nibalba and the Votanite empire, as related in the other narrative.

The Olmecs and Nicalancas, who, with other nations, are supposed to have preceeded the Toltecs in Mexico, are conceded by all authorities to be Nahuas. As nations, they became extinct before the Spanish conquest, and tradition first notices them on the south-eastern coast, to which place they had come in ships from the east.

We find here in these secular histories and traditions a remarkable confirmation of the historical portion of the Book of Mormon. A careful reading of the Book of Omni (Book of Mormon) will give a correct version of the early settlement of Yucatan by the colony led by Mulek (Votan, or Zanna) from Jerusalem, and we see plainly wherein modern writers become confused, by confounding the two histories, that of the people of Zarahemla and that on the engraved stone, recording the history of the Jaredites who came to America shortly after the confusion of tongues at Babel, which is fully related in the Book of Ether (Book of Mormon).

We find the secular and sacred histories definite and in harmony in regard to the arrival by sea from the east of the immigrants; also that they were not the first settlers; and though having refinement of manners, "they denied the being of their Creator." Tradition says they were joined by a people who originally came from their own country in the east, which doubtless has allusion to the union of the people of Zarahemla with the Nephites, under Mosiah. They found records of a previous colony, and their account of these have in time probably become confused and intermingled in the secular story of their own history, to the confusion of modern researchers.

This confounding of the three histories (the Jaredites', Votans', and the union with Mosiah) has probably confused Ordenez, and led to the inference that Votan made several voyages.

Here also rises an important question from the definite location given by the secular narratives of the ancient city Zanna. Is it not possible that the great Rio Usumasinta, "flowing north into the sea," may be the ancient river Sidon? Those remarkable and world-famous ruins known under the name of Palenque may yet be proven to be the remains of that "great city and religious center" of the aboriginals, called Zarahemla. "This city may have been identical with Nibalba; the difficulty in disproving the identity is equaled only by that of proving it." (Baneroft, Vol. 5, p. 295.)

The ruins are found on a branch or tributary of the Usumasinta, and their extent is undefined. Several travelers have written descriptions of these remarkable ruins. Possibly the best are by Waldeck, with drawings, who visited the ruins in 1832, and that of Stephens, with Catherwood's drawings, who visited and explored the ancient city in 1840.

All the old traditions and records relating to the early colonizers are unanimous in describing them as white men with beards.

But the so called Palenque is not the only city in the old Maya dominion; the whole country is dotted with ruins, and there are unmistakable evidences of its having at one time been inhabited by a dense and industrious population.

## A DIALOGUE,

*Between a Gentile Gentleman and a "Mormon" Youth.*

GENTILE GENTLEMAN.—"Young man, can you tell me what that building is?"

"MORMON" YOUTH.—"That is the Temple of the Lord."

G. G.—"And that in the corner?"

M. Y.—"That is the new Tabernacle, sir."

G. G.—"And that larger one beyond?"

M. Y.—"That is the large Tabernacle, sir."

G. G.—"What are they all for?"

M. Y.—"To worship God in."

G. G.—"But why are so many buildings needed? Why would not one be sufficient?"

M. Y.—"They are for different purposes."

G. G.—"What is that small Tabernacle for?"

M. Y.—"For public meetings, and for meetings of various Church officers, or authorities, for various purposes. It will be very convenient for public meetings in the winter or in bad weather, and for some other meetings at any time."

G. G.—"What is the large Tabernacle for?"

M. Y.—"For public meetings."

G. G.—"Why not use that for public meetings all the time?"

M. Y.—"Because it is too large, and it is too cold in winter. It is more especially used to hold general conferences in, which are held twice a year, at which times it is frequently full."

G. G.—"How many people will it hold?"

M. Y.—"Ten or twelve thousand. But I presume fifteen thousand, if the standing room was fully occupied as well as the sitting room."

G. G.—"That is a large congregation."

M. Y.—"Yes, sir, and the building is sometimes so full that hundreds of people remain outside during the services."

G. G.—"What is the Temple for?"

M. Y.—"It is for various purposes."

G. G.—"Can you tell me some of them?"

M. Y.—"Yes, sir. It is a place for the instruction of the members of the priesthood in their duties. It is a place for prayer and