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The Challenge of the Maya Mystery

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Abstract: Giving a history of the Gates Collection of Mayan literature located at Brigham Young University, this author hopes that the origin of the Mayan culture may be found through study and a greater understanding.

The Challenge of

THE MAYA MYSTERY

By John L. Sorenson

IN ONE of the most modern buildings of America, the new science building at Brigham Young University, lies what may be the key to the challenging enigma of some of the continent's greatest ancient structures.

There, awaiting the attention of ambitious scholars, are found volume on volume of the curious writing symbols of the Mayas, builders of massive, thriving cities in Central America, centuries before Columbus. These writings



A purported "alphabet" of Maya given by Diego de Landa in his "Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan."

make up the Gates Collection, possibly the most complete library of records in existence intended to untangle the puzzle of what the Maya characters say.

Collector William Gates began to study ancient history seriously about fifty years ago at Point Loma, California. His interest then was the mythical lost continent of Atlantis which he believed to have been the real source of such high civilization as the Maya. Because of this belief he began to study what was known of the discovered remains of the Mayas. However, once exposed to the fascination of such a challenging problem as Maya history, he abandoned his Atlantis views and became more scientific in studying the Mayas.

He set on a plan of action he thought would eventually unravel the tangle of fantasy and fact about the Mayas that cluttered both the popular and scientific minds of his

day. He thought that many of the writing symbols of the people stood for sounds, were "phonetic." There might be, then, hope of matching sound to sign and deciphering the whole, if only we knew just how the Maya spoke. As a matter of fact, there are records of many separate tribes who spoke languages of the Mayance family, but no single one of these today would be like the pure ancient tongue, if there were such a thing.

Gates' plan was to work backward from these later languages to try to reconstruct the old Maya speech sounds from which he thought all these later branches must have sprung. The task is much like that which a scholar would face if he had to work out how Caesar's Latin sounded from only a knowledge of Spanish, French, Italian, and related languages.

Immediately Gates' plan ran into difficulties. Few documents or inscriptions in Maya characters were known or at least accessible then. With so little of Mayan to work with, decipherment of the glyphs was out of the question. Consequently, this determined investigator, though far from wealthy, set out to gather singlehanded all he could find of the existing material in or about the language.

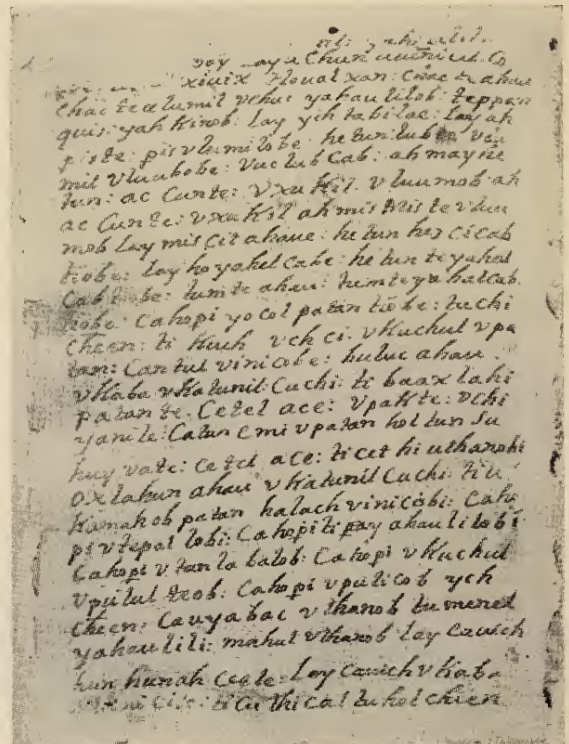
This long, arduous search took most of Gates' time and energy for a quarter of a century and actually continued right up to his death. He himself rode horseback through much of turbulent Mexico seeking his precious manuscripts. He kept

buyer-representatives at all the sales of the great private library collections of the world, and by photographing everything he could not buy, came to hold, by 1930, about everything that was anything to a Maya linguist.

Then, with a few interested friends and backers, he organized the Maya Society to carry on his work and publish his invaluable materials. There followed a period of eight years when Gates, as president of the society, worked at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore making masterfully detailed copies of his rare documents for fellow linguists and laboring on his pet researches.

At his death in 1940 the collection became little used, attracting much more dust than interest. But in a few years Gates' widow decided to sell everything. Dr. M. Wells Jakeman, a Maya scholar who is now chairman of the B.Y.U. Department of Archaeology, ex-

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A page from "The Book of Chilam Balam Chumagel," an important historical source written in the Maya language in Spanish characters.

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THROUGH THE EYES OF YOUTH

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which person is the type of person we want to marry and whether that person has the same ideals and attitude toward marriage as we do. I am thinking now of temple marriage and the importance of choosing a companion for time and eternity. How privileged we are to have such a blessing if we live for it! How thankful we can be, upon being married in the temple, for the teachings of the restoration and the authority of the priesthood which can bind and seal on earth ordinances which will be binding in the heavens.

The world's idea of marriage is very different from the one I have been taught. The looseness of a civil marriage doesn't seem to hold a shadow of the value that the Lord intended marriage should. "Till death do you part" sounds very hollow to me in comparison with the words, "for time and all eternity."

For us as Latter-day Saints, marriage is the foundation of the greatest happiness. President Joseph Fielding Smith has said: "Marriage is the grandest, most glorious, and most exalting principle connected with the gospel. It is that which

the Lord holds in reserve for those who become his sons and daughters." (*The Way to Perfection*, page 233.) The Lord has made us feel the sacredness of temple ordinances in these words:

And inasmuch as my people build a house unto me in the name of the Lord, and do not suffer any unclean thing to come into it, that it be not defiled, my glory shall rest upon it:

Yea, and my presence shall be there. . . . (D. & C. 97:15-16.)

I feel, therefore, that possibly the most far-reaching decision I can ever make will be to keep myself clean and continuously worthy to enter into his holy house.

I hope with all my heart that I might make these choices in the right way, and may our Heavenly Father bless each of us with his spirit, that we all may choose to live happy, useful lives of service; that we may also be messengers of the gospel of peace wherever we may be by living close to the Lord; and finally may we be endowed with his Heavenly Spirit, to be ever prepared to enter the House of the Lord and there receive the blessings which will exalt us in the eternities to come.

CHALLENGE OF THE MAYA MYSTERY

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amined the collection in detail as an expert appraiser, and it was on his recommendation that B.Y.U. purchased part of the library. Accordingly, in 1946 the Maya section of the Gates Collection came to the Provo campus. Tulane University at New Orleans obtained the Aztec part.

Among the piles of crates unloaded at Provo that year were some of the most prized books of the New World. Among others were Gates' own originals of his definitive reproductions of the *Codex Peresianus*, *Codex Dresdensis*, and *Codex Tro-Cortesianus*, the only three Maya manuscripts known to be earlier than the Spanish conquest of America. Also included were many pages of unfinished manuscripts containing Gates' own investigations along with thousands

of pages of invaluable rare photo-stats.

The work done by Gates in making available basic sources for research was instrumental in helping other active scholars in the same field to decipher part of the strange inscriptions that adorn the great stone monuments of Yucatan and Guatemala. Today about a third of them, pertaining to calendar dates, are deciphered. The remaining signs are more tantalizing than ever, for it may be from these that we can learn the answers to the perennial questions, "Who were the Mayas?" and "How did their high culture begin?"

Today the collection challenges all lovers of mysteries. The massive dictionaries, the pocket-sized grammars, and vellum-backed catechisms laboriously compiled by Spanish

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THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

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And it isn't work done this way: Dip the blanket in a tub of heavy suds with lukewarm water and 8 tablespoons of Vano Powdered Bleach. Feed through a power wringer or spin dry and redip at least five times. Rinse twice. Stretch the edges and hang straight by placing the blanket half over the clothesline. Hang out of the sun. Brush when dry. Press the binding under damp cloth.



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CHALLENGE OF THE MAYA MYSTERY

(Concluded from page 738)

padres, the tortuous lines of the native manuscripts, and even the provocatively half-finished manuscript of Gates' huge comparative dictionary of the Mayance dialects, all beckon scholars with a bent for the mysterious. Now housed in the quarters of the Department of

Archaeology in the new B.Y.U. Physical Science Building, little use is being made of this treasure house of knowledge since fellowship funds and sufficient trained personnel are lacking. But the collection holds its secrets well, and those who attack it will have to be competent linguists to solve its problems.

The Question of Divorce

RICHARD L. EVANS

THERE is a problem perennially before us, acute and increasing. No matter how widely differing may be the laws and leanings toward divorce, we must admit that in our time there has been an alarming laxity of attitude toward broken marriages, broken homes, broken families. Perhaps most men would be willing to concede that there are some serious causes which seem to suggest that people who have once been wedded go their separate ways. But it must also be admitted that to the serious causes there have been added many superficial causes which cater to the quick changes of mind and of heart of those who too lightly consider the obligations and privileges of marriage. Often the person who seeks divorce as the way out has supposed that others who are married do not have adjustments to make or compromises of personal privilege. But never would we find a man and a woman whose thoughts and whose preferences were so alike as to require that neither of them give up anything for the privilege of pursuing life together. Too many who request a termination of their marital vows imagine that their errors of understanding and deficiencies of wisdom would, with someone else, unquestionably solve themselves. But those who cannot make their peace with one partner in marriage have no positive assurance that they can make their peace with another, because often those who seek separation suppose that others are wholly the cause of contention, whereas they themselves may be at least in part responsible. Admittedly there may be many exceptions to all these generalizations—but marriage is more than a social convention, more than a personal privilege, more than a legal contract. It is a solemn and sacred covenant which affects not only the lives of two people, but also the whole social pattern of the present, and the lives of the generation to come. Personal happiness, the strength of a nation, and the stability of society itself depend upon the integrity of home and family which easy divorce tends to undermine without putting anything in its place. These and many other solemn considerations should precede the making of a marriage, and should deter the decision to divorce.

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