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Exploring American Ruins

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Abstract: This three-part series presents some legends and traditions of the Native Americans in association with ruins, especially of Central America. They seem to prove that the Book of Mormon is historically correct. Throughout the Americas, the Native Americans believed in a Messiah who came a long time ago and promised to return. The high priest of the Quiche Indians wore a breastplate with seven precious stones. It was a Urim and Thummim used to decide the innocence or guilt of those accused of crimes. It would reveal both past and future events. The third and final part discusses a K'iche' legend.

Accounting

THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS' MILLENNIAL STAR.

[ESTABLISHED 1840].

“How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach, except they be sent?”—ROM. 10: 14, 15.

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EXPLORING AMERICAN RUINS.

BY ELDER WALTER M. WOLFE OF THE LONDON CONFERENCE.

(Continued from page 164).

A LEGEND OF THE QUICHÉS.

IN the jungles of Yucatan, far from cities and churches, every Indian hut has its rude image of jade, stone or clay. These images are very small, so that they may be easily concealed, for even to this day it is a terrible crime for an Indian to be detected in idolatry. It is sure to result in punishment; it may result in a life of servitude. But he is an idolater none the less. Wonderful to relate he cannot carve out gods to-day that are able to hear and answer his prayers; but any old, pigmy deity, made before the time of the Spanish conquest, is a suitable object of adoration. Whenever a ruin is unearthed it is eagerly explored with the hope that some “graven image” may be found therein. To me it was, for a long time, inexplicable that the Quichés and Mayas should pray to such idols when they realize their own inability to reproduce them. They may cut the stone and mould the clay in the same form and likeness as that of the god which is worshipped. But because the Indian of to-day has not the priesthood, and the old gods were worshipped under the authority of the priesthood, his product is only a base, powerless counterfeit of the simon-pure article. Without the authority and sanction of the priesthood there could have been no gods, no religion. The tradition of the priesthood is strong in the mind of the savage.

So far as the natives of Central America are concerned, their priesthood, which had been held and exercised without intermission since the epoch of the downfall, about 500 A.D., came to an end with the conquest of Alvarado, in 1524. The account of this conquest, particularly with regard to its effect upon the religious status of the Quiché and Kachiquel of to-day is found in the story of Alxit—a story which is often told by the evening fire, both in the adobe-walled houses of the city and under the palm-thatch of the forest. The legend is as follows:

In the year 1484 A.D., the good king Quicab (sweet hand) ruled the mighty realm of the Quichés. Quicab was a worshipper of the gods, and hewed from the rock a secret cave wherein he placed many carved images, that he might worship in private, by night as well as by day. Of the place of this cave none knew, save the members of the royal family. And Quicab, being old, divided his kingdom into three parts, over each of which he placed a prince to reign; and, after enjoining peace and union among his people, he died and was buried. Now, during the reign of his successor, there came strange tales into the land of the Quichés and Guatemalas of a wonderful people that had invaded the northland of the Aztecas. They were to be feared even as the immortal gods. They had white faces, but the fear was not on account of the white faces, because all the priests were white, but rather because they were one with the wonderful animals which they rode, and their weapons were the lightning and thunder.

And when two-score years had passed since the death of Quicab, the invader came southward into the land of the Quichés, and the people were divided among themselves, the greater part being for war, but the King favored peace. So the two-thirds part of the Quichés rebelled against the authority of their king and chose Tecun-uman (plant for healing), a young prince of the house royal, to lead them to battle against their enemies. As the heart of Tecun-uman loved the smell of war and loved his country, he became their captain and assembled an army outside the wall of Utatlan, the capital. But for a long time he debated within himself whether it were right or not to march to battle without the consent of the king, his overlord.

Now there dwelt in the royal palace the Princess Alxit (emerald), the granddaughter of King Quicab. She was fair to look upon. Many princes and warriors would have wooed her, but her heart was warm toward her cousin, Tecun-uman, and Tecun-uman loved no woman, save Alxit. Among her suitors was the Prince Chojinel (bloody warrior). Because she rejected him, his soul was black against Tecun-uman and Alxit. Through him came her fate. When she heard that her lover purposed battle against the Spaniards, she determined to dissuade him from his attempt. So she took her maid-servants and her nurse, Alnoy, and went from the city to the camp of Tecun-uman. And on the way she told Alnoy all that was in her heart to do. However, the old nurse did but chide her and ridicule her, and said:

“It will be well to tell among the princes and warriors of the Quichés that Tecun-uman and his maid, Alxit, fled to the mountains and hid in the caves and enjoyed their love, while their country was overrun by the enemy, and their armies destroyed for want of a leader.”

Then was Alxit angry with her nurse. She smote her in the face, and bade

her begone and wait with the maidens while she went alone to the camp of Tecun-uman. Now Chojinel had seen these things afar off, and while Alxit was gone, he drew Alnoy to one side, and they conspired together how they might deliver Alxit into the power of the priests, that she might be made a sacrifice to the sun and that they might be well rid of her. In the meanwhile Alxit reached the camp and, sending for her lover, told her great affection for him and recalled his promises to her. She urged him to do nothing against the will of the king, but to remain at Utatlan, making a last stand there, that all might conquer or perish together. But even by her great love for him Tecun-uman was not to be moved. He told her that he would march to Totonicapan, defeat the enemy, return a conqueror and claim her as his reward. So he sought his tent and Alxit went back to the city weeping.

That night Chojinel and Alnoy went to the priests and swore falsely that Alxit was conspiring with the Spaniards to deliver the city into their hands. The priests believed their report. So, early the next morning, Alxit was seized and brought to judgment in the great square of Utatlan. She was led before the high priest. To his right were four lesser priests, to his left four noble warriors, below the thousands of the city, and behind them the pyramid, surmounted by the bloody sacrificial stone. In front of the high priest was a table on which rested the holy aguizote (son-of-the-seerstone), its seven jewels glistening in the morning light. On its decision hung the fate of the accused. After Alnoy and Chojinel had given their perjured testimony, the high priest arose and consulted the aguizote. It declared the prisoner guilty and the eight judges ratified the verdict. Alxit was taken by the soldiers and led across the plaza towards the place of execution.

But word had been brought to Tecun-uman of the wicked doings in Utatlan. Thither he rushed with his chosen companions. Rescuing Alxit from her guards, he took her to a place of safety, even to the secret cave of Quicab. And he gave her food and told her to be of good courage, for he would surely return ere long to redeem all his promises. Then he left the maiden and marched southward, with all his forces, to the fatal field near Totonicapan. But Alxit could find no comfort in her heart, and when darkness came she could not sleep. And, in the middle of the night, the cave was filled with light. In the midst of the light there was a form. It was that of her grandfather, Quicab. And he spake to her and told her to be of good cheer, for all that was was the will of the immortal gods. He revealed to her that the armies should be destroyed, and Utatlan should fall; that Tecun-uman should be killed and that her own death would soon follow. He also told her where to find the poisoned arrows, which she well knew how to use when the worst should come. Finally he gave her a message to his people. In order to save their own lives they must outwardly accept the faith of their conquerors, but they must never forget their old religion. The gods of Utatlan must also be cast into Lake Atitlan, or buried, to prevent their falling into the hands of the Spaniards, "But the time will come," said Quicab, "when these Gods shall arise from the water and from the ground. They shall lead the Quichés to victory. Then shall the people once more be white. The old race of Botan shall rule in peace and power, and the invader shall be driven from the land." So saying, he disappeared.

After three days the wicked nurse, Alnoy, came to the secret cave, for well she guessed where Alxit was hidden. She brought with her soldiers of the Spaniards that they might work their wicked will upon the maid. But there came also, as though friendly to so foul a purpose, servants of the royal household. These trusted that they might deliver their mistress from her cruel fate. And when Alnoy saw that Alxit was alone, she taunted her and told her how her lover, Tecun-uman, had been killed in the great battle near Totonicapan. Furthermore, she bade her prepare to deliver herself to the Christians, since they had come for that purpose.

Now Alxit did not answer nor did she weep, for her heart was prepared for all that might befall. But she saw the two menservants in whom she trusted, and she asked that she might be permitted to speak to them apart. The soldiers, knowing that there was no chance for escape, granted her request. So she told the men secretly all the message that had been given to her by the spirit of Quicab, and ordered them to flee and tell it to the priests of the Quichés. And when she had done this she took one of the poisoned darts of Quicab and stabbed herself, so that she died. Then great anguish fell upon Alnoy, the evil-minded nurse; and the soldiers, deeming, that she had killed herself for love of Tecun-uman, marvelled much and repented of the wickedness they had purposed. But the men of Quiché fled to the city of Utatlan and told all that had happened, not forgetting the words of King Quicab. So the images were cast into Lake Atitlan or buried; and the great city of Utatlan fell as had been prophesied, but to-day the Quichés meet in the sacred cave and pray for the time when the gods shall come forth from the water and from the ground, and the lordly race of Botan reign again over the land of Guatemala.

The ruins of Utatlan lie about four miles from the modern city of Santa Cruz del Quiché which is built from the stones of the ancient capital. But the old sacrificial pyramids remain, as do also some of the massive walls and tiled pavements. As among the Aztecs, human sacrifice was common, the heart, torn from the living victim, being offered to the sun, while the yet breathing body was thrown to the multitude below. A former article spoke of the tradition concerning the color of the priests, but the aguizote deserves passing notice. It was a breastplate of seven precious stones, fastened by shoulder bands, and worn by the high priest in officiating at the sacred rites. It was also a Urim and Thummim, revealing both past and future, and was often consulted, as in this instance, to decide as to the guilt or innocence of the accused. Its use would indicate a corruption of the Hebrew custom, it being very similar to the ephod and breastplate that was made for Aaron.

The legend shows, without additional explanation, why the Indians of the south retain their pagan religion, though secretly; and also gives a faint clue as to their aspirations for the future.

THE Mormon community is an enlarged family, bound together by privileges and duties, one principal duty being to care for the helpless and the needy. At the same time, every individual has full freedom of action. There is no compulsion on any Mormon beyond the public opinion of his fellows, and none is possible.—JAMES W. BARCLAY, M.P.