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Prophecy Among the Maya

Author(s): John L. Sorenson

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Chapter 77

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4 Nephi 1:34 "They were led by many priests and false prophets."

A variety of forms of prophecy existed among the Maya Indians and other people of Mesoamerica at the time of the Spanish Conquest and long before. Several aspects of Maya prophecy are noteworthy and suggest possible connections with the Book of Mormon peoples in that area.

First, prophecy among the Maya was a well-established cultural institution termed *bobatil*. Much of their prophecy used calendar units such as the 260-day *tzol kin* ("year"), or the four yearbearers and the 52-year Calendar Round (*kin tun y abil*). Among the Yucatec Maya the *katun* (a 7200-day unit, or twenty 360-day years or *tuns*) was also used. Their prophecies were written down in books (*huunob*). All these features were normal in Post-Classic Maya life (after about A.D. 800), and thus Munro Edmonson cautiously concludes: "It would be surprising if they had not had books of historical prophecy" in the Classic era (A.D. 200-800).¹

Second, Maya prophecy foretold specific events. The early Catholic Bishop of Yucatan, Diego de Landa, described Maya prophecies for the day, for the year, for the *katun*, and for the coming of the Spaniards. The prophets were called *chilans*, and each served as priest, registrar, prophet, and examiner of officials alongside a political lord. One of the most famous was named Ah Cambal, who lived in the area around Mani in the province dominated by the Tutul Xiu lineage. Shortly before the coming of the Spaniards, he prophesied that his people would soon be subjugated by a white, bearded race coming from the east who would preach to them one God and the power of a tree, called *uahom che*, represented by a cross and meaning "a tree erected with great virtue against the evil spirit." As a result the Tutul Xiu group (and certain other Yucatecans) welcomed the Spaniards. What the *chilan* had in mind was apparently the return of Quetzalcoatl and his white-robed priests.²

Third, the Maya view saw history in cycles. Their calendar featured Short Count cycles of 13 *katuns*. About every 256 of our years, these 13 repeated themselves. Each cycle was named for its concluding day. A historical "record of the *katuns*" kept track of events and served as a basis for prophecy. The basic pattern of good or ill fate that characterized each *katun* was expected to appear again when the named *katun* returned. Thus, for example, the Itza of Tayasal living in the lowland forest of Guatemala in 1618 resisted Christianization because "the time [had] not yet arrived" for a change in their ways. Finally, in 1696, Father Avendano, who had familiarized himself with the *katun* prophecies, persuaded them that the time to become Christians was near. When in the following year (1697) a Spanish army finally conquered them with ease, the event was only 136 days short of the prophesied time when the rulership was to change.

Fourth, the Maya governed their lives by their prophetic outlook. Dennis Puleston maintains that changes in Maya civilization were "triggered by an internal mechanism" consisting of Maya assumptions about the power of prophetic time. When change was to come, it would *inevitably* come.³ Strong faith in the inevitability of prophecy may have led leaders and commoners alike to act in ways that helped to bring about the expected results. Yet more than belief was involved: actual climatic changes correlate significantly with Maya prophecies about the weather.⁴

Earlier traces of this pattern of prophecy might be visible at a number of points in the Book of Mormon. Prophets likewise regularly lived among the Nephites; they wrote books; they prophesied of specific times and events; their records especially note recurring times of good and evil; they served in juxtaposition to political lords and judges; and their followers gauged their lives prophetically. Thus, the prophecies of Nephi (see 1 Nephi 12:11-15; 2 Nephi 26:9-10), Alma (see Alma 45:10-14), and Samuel the Lamanite (see Helaman 13:5, 9) about when the Nephites would be destroyed may be an even *baktun* (400 years = 20 twenty-year *katuns*), the main cycle of the Long Count.⁵

Furthermore, the Maya cycle of thirteen *katuns* may correlate with certain other events in Nephite history. One cycle of thirteen *katuns* before the known Maya evil hiatus beginning in A.D. 534 would be close to the time in 4 Nephi 1:41-42 when "the wicked part of the people began again to build up the secret oaths and combinations of Gadianton." One cycle

of thirteen *katuns* earlier begins in A.D. 22, which is just prior to the collapse of the Nephite central government (see 3 Nephi 7:1-2; 8:1-4), followed by the great destruction accompanying the crucifixion.

Further research may identify other possible relationships between events and tendencies in Nephite cultural history and prophecy among the ancient Mesoamericans.

Based on research by John L. Sorenson, July 1986.

Footnotes

1. See Munro Edmonson, "Some Postclassic Questions about the Classic Maya," *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 12 (1979): 157-78.
2. Alfred E. Tozzer, ed., *Landa's Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan*, Paper 18 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1941), 26-27, 42-43.
3. See Dennis Puleston, "An Epistemological Pathology and the Collapse, or Why the Maya Kept the Short Count," in Norman Hammond and Gordon Willey, eds., *Maya Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 63-71.
4. See William H. Folan and Burma H. Hyde, "Climatic Forecasting and Recording among the Ancient and Historic Maya," in William Folan, ed., *Contributions to the Archaeology and Ethnohistory of Greater Mesoamerica* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 15-48.
5. 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), 270-76.