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## Belief and Worship

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## Belief and Worship

### Overview

**B**elief and worship were extremely complex and varied in ancient Mesoamerica. Study by scholars of the material on these topics still has a long way to go. One reason for the obscurity is that sources on the subject are limited. Even where Spanish writers—usually Catholic priests—tried to understand and record features of native beliefs and practices, we may doubt that they got everything clear that they were told. In fact, they must have got a lot wrong, not to mention whole topics of which they were told nothing. For one thing, there obviously were different cults—patterns of worship and belief—that served different purposes for different people in different areas. Such variations are still far from straightened out, although some progress is being made.

A subtle danger faces us when we analyze ancient life using ideas from modern times. The conceptual category *religion* is a product of western European thinking. The ancient civilizations, however—the Egyptians, the Hebrews, the Chinese, the Maya—did not separate out a category of human experience nor use a term equivalent to our term *religion*. For them, all of life involved religion, or vice versa. The powers of supernatural beings, beliefs about the origin of the world and of humans, moral and ethical standards, and certain ceremonial conduct—what we mean by religion—were so intertwined with the rest of life that such a formal and restricted category as we employ would have struck them as odd, if not incomprehensible. But because readers of this volume follow the Western tradition, for convenience we lump together here information about the assortment of topics that we consider to constitute religion.

When we examine the cultures of central and southern Mexico and northern Central America, one key point stands out. H. B. Nicholson has said the following about the Aztecs, and the statement applies as well to peoples throughout Mesoamerica: "The native societies of late pre-Hispanic central Mexico were among the most highly ritualized of all time. Religion permeated every facet of the

The communal nature of ancient worship continued to be typical among modern Mesoamericans in the villages until very recently and still is in places. A few leaders bore the burden of addressing the invisible powers on behalf of the whole community. Only those with strong interest or with the prestige, learning, and wealth to allow them to participate according to the prescribed standards would normally take part. Many commoners were likely to leave such matters in the hands of the elite, satisfied that the ritual necessities were being taken care of on behalf of all, as by these three representatives in Zinacantan, Chiapas.



culture. No important area of human activity was entirely free from its pervasive influence, and some were almost completely dominated by it. . . . The power and influence of the priesthood was truly remarkable."<sup>97</sup> Every routine activity took on a sacred sense for them. For instance, among the Aztecs maize, the mainstay of their diet,



was considered holy, and if kernels were found lying on the ground, the finder was supposed to pick them up and make a verbal apology for giving insufficient respect to this gift from the gods.<sup>98</sup> Sacred matters were of concern always and everywhere.

Modern descendants continue this extreme emphasis on ceremony and the

sacred side of life. For instance, from the ethnographic field work of Evon Z. Vogt and colleagues, we learn that for the Tzotzil Indians who inhabit Zinacantan, a village in highland Chiapas, "every step in life . . . is ceremonialized: being pregnant, giving birth, courting, borrowing and repaying money, taking religious office,

being cured of illness, and being buried. There are thirty-four religious fiesta days each year, but these account for only a small portion of [the total] time spent in ceremonial activity."<sup>99</sup>

Historically, Mesoamerican society's concern with religion has been expressed through different complexes of belief and ritual that have spread from place to place over time or have sprung up repeatedly out of basic human needs. One extremely old and widespread complex dealt with healing or finding the cause of good or bad luck; it is called shamanism. A shaman is a person, typically with unusual personality qualities, who believes he or she has received a calling from supernatural powers to be an intermediary between them and common mortals. To make contact, the shaman goes into a trance, with or without the aid of a drug like tobacco. While in the trance, the shaman communicates key information to bystanders, such as a diagnosis for an illness and its magical treatment. (The modern term *shaman* and the fullest descriptions of the practice of shamanism come from studies of tribal groups in Siberia.) These practitioners are known also as, or at least overlap in their role with, curers, witch doctors, and medicine men. Several sorts of shamans continue to function among the least modern peoples in the Mesoamerican area and among American Indian remnants generally, where they coexist with other historical layers of religion.

Alongside shamanism, or sometimes blended with it, were priest-led cults that acknowledged the control of supernatural beings over the powers of nature. Offerings were commonly made by these priests, acting on behalf of the community, to deities who were thought to control the sprouting and harvesting of crops and the reproductive powers of animals and humans. (In the Israel of the Old Testament, this type of cult was called baalism.) Avoiding nature's uncertainties was the most obvious focus of these cults, yet the idea of devotion and sacrifice also extended to other matters, such as pleas

for health (as a preventive alternative to the shaman's cures), success in war, and so on. At its most basic, this type of belief system was closely connected with magic in its attempt to control natural events. (Magic supposes that rites carried out in imitation of a desired natural state will lead, or perhaps even compel, nature to follow suit. For example, if crops needed rain, the priest poured out a liquid offering as a metaphor for rain, or he made puffs of tobacco smoke that imitated and so "produced" actual clouds.) Appeals to the deities might overlap with prayers and respect to the ancestors. Their postmortal spirits were supposed to have power to shape events to the good (or harm) of their descendants.

Whether organized systems of belief and worship existed in Mesoamerica that were comparable to the churches known in later Europe and western Asia is a matter of dispute. A few researchers have suggested the possibility, but information is slim for settling the matter, even after the difficult problem of definition has been struggled with.

One key point that moderns need to keep in mind is that in Mesoamerican civilization, as in the ancient Old World, ritual and spiritual concerns were mainly a social, not an individual, matter. Any person's ritual behavior and beliefs were of secondary concern compared with the group's conformity to sacred norms. There was a strong tendency toward family, kin, community, and tribal unity in religious matters. Just as there was little room in society for an individual to act strictly for self in the economic or political realms, so it was in matters of belief; only rarely could an individual afford the luxury of isolation from his primary support group by worshipping differently. Of course there were always a few individuals who did their own thinking and worshipping, but people generally were unable to withstand the demands for unified action made by those who held crucial social, economic, and political power to ruin their lives if they turned nonconformist.



You are in the innermost regions  
 of the heavens  
 giving origin to your word . . .  
 You, who are God.  
 What is it that you determine there?  
 Is it that for us on earth  
 you have been overcome with weariness?  
 Must you hide from us your glory and your splendor?  
 What is it that you determine on this earth?

*CANTARES MEXICANOS*

Ultimately every religious system addresses all the crucial questions that cultures raise about life's puzzles, although forms and emphases differ from place to place in the way the queries are phrased. This Aztec cry to deity shows the profundity that could spring from minds engaged in what the European conquerors considered barbaric religious beliefs and practices.



### VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

We have already noted how Amulek in the Book of Mormon had a large network of family, kin, and friends (see Alma 10:2–4). When he challenged community religious standards, and thereby those of his kin, by allying with the unpopular prophet Alma<sub>2</sub>, he was first imprisoned and finally expelled by his cohorts (see Alma 14:1–15:1). For another illustration of the pressure toward group conformity, consider how Alma<sub>2</sub>'s converts were soon exiled by their Zoramite community (see Alma 35:6).

The Book of Mormon makes clear at other points too the corporate nature of most religious life. For instance, we are told that those of the Lamanites who were converted by the sons of Mosiah and their companion missionaries consisted of all the people in land after land and city after city (see Alma 23:9–13). On the other hand, “the Amalekites were not converted, save only one; neither were any of the Amulonites” (Alma 23:14). Individual thinking and action were clearly not encouraged. Dissenters,

whether to or from the Nephite or Lamanite traditions, rarely managed to dwell among a hostile majority of contrary believers. The difficulty of trying to live a distinct pattern of worship in the midst of opponents is emphasized in Alma 1:19–22.

Most LDS readings of the Book of Mormon have focused on the religious ideals preached by its prophetic leaders and historians—the spiritual cream of the cream, as it were. What actually was going on among the people at large has received little attention. We would do well to study carefully the popular version of religion as it was by seeing what the prophets condemned in the Book of Mormon. Moreover, most modern readers quite naturally read the ancient text by projecting current religious ideas back upon it, as though the Nephites had thought like twentieth-century Mormons. That would not have been true, of course. The historical and cultural contexts of the two traditions are drastically different, even though interesting similarities can be seen.

## Deities and Other Supernaturals

Our sources about ancient Mesoamerican divinities (remember that almost all the information was filtered through the Spaniards) seem to show that there were many gods. However, scholars have not agreed on just what that means.<sup>100</sup> At one extreme some (like J. E. S. Thompson)<sup>101</sup> have detected a basic early belief in a single god at least for some groups. Critics maintain that this is a misreading.

Whatever today's scholars think about the issue of one or many gods, they still tend to assume that each people had one consistent set of beliefs shared by everyone in the group. A very different way of looking at ancient Mesoamerican religion is hardly considered—that even a single people did not agree among themselves on a single set of beliefs. Perhaps some argued about dogma and deities as Renaissance Christians did.

Most Mesoamerican deities were believed to be in human or animal form. In general the gods were thought to be invisible but could choose to appear to humans through dreams and visions. Many of the supernaturals were said to dwell in a realm above the earth. (Three, or seven, or thirteen levels or heavens were supposed to be piled atop one another above the earth's surface. Other divinities were assigned to corresponding levels beneath the earth.)

An important concept was that a given people had a special relationship, in name and loyalty, with a particular god. "The erection of a shrine for the patron deity usually constituted the first official act of settlement of a new community."<sup>102</sup> This temple structure became the symbol of the town's independence and integrity.

No doubt elite religious thinkers had a more complicated set of beliefs than did common people. It has always been so. For instance, ancient Egyptian commoners certainly did not bother themselves with niceties about how the god Seth related to the deity Horus. Very likely, plain folks everywhere tried to stay out of trouble with the gods by following the lowest common denominator of rituals. Figures higher up the social and economic ladder



Some Mesoamerican peoples frequently represented their deities in art. Others did not do so routinely. Tlaloc was one of the great gods of the Aztec era in central Mexico and is visible in the art of predecessor peoples for centuries earlier. He was considered primarily responsible for the rain. This striking vase with his face painted on it comes from the Templo Mayor, the Aztec "downtown" sacred center.

had more time and schooling to split theological hairs, but the mass probably paid attention largely to the few notions or powers that they thought controlled everyday life, like the growth of crops.

*Idols* is another problematic label. Interestingly, when the Spaniards arrived, some native Mesoamerican priests scorned them for what looked to their eyes like Catholic "idolatry," for that is what the adoration of the cross seemed. One person's sacred emblem may be another person's idol. In any case, some scholars have observed that carved figures that might have been idols were relatively rare until the Late Classic period, say, from A.D. 600 on. Many of the figures we see on carved monuments are now recognized not as gods at all but as public celebrities or ancestors, sometimes decked out with insignia of a god. So it is hard to know how many idols or gods may have been used anciently, because we don't know



This effigy incense burner from Tapijulapa, Chiapas, may represent what Catholic priests called a "demon" in the native belief system.



The Old Fire God was connected to fire in general and also to volcanoes. This characteristic symbol of him as an old man with a brazier on his back comes from Teotihuacan and is dated around A.D. 500. Similar forms occur from as early as 200 B.C. up to the Spanish Conquest.



Ehecatl was considered by the Aztecs a specialized, wind-connected aspect of the god Quetzalcoatl. (That famous god is pictured later in this book.) This fine representation of Ehecatl (or whatever he was called at that time) came from excavations by the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation at Izapa dating from about the first century B.C.



The sun god was modeled in plaster on the sides of temples at El Mirador and elsewhere in the lowlands of the Yucatan Peninsula before the Christian era. This thirteen-foot-high version at the site of Uuxactun was repeated a number of times on the faces of structure E-VII-sub. An artist's reconstruction fleshes out the partially destroyed original.

how people in those day defined or worshipped their deities.

Ancient peoples and some of their modern descendants in Mexico and Central America believed in other supernatural figures besides deities. A miscellany of equivalents to leprechauns, angels, demons, and other supernatural entities representing good or evil powers were recognized, but we know little about their natures and functions.



### VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

**T**he God of Israel" (1 Nephi 5:9, 10) who was worshipped by the Nephite prophets had rivals throughout most of that people's history, we learn upon close examination of their record.<sup>103</sup> The Lamanites had idols and, presumably, beliefs and practices related to gods other than the God of Israel, almost from their beginning (see Enos 1:20). The "Mulekites" can hardly have had anything like a conventional version of Judaism (they "denied the being of their Creator," Omni 1:17). Other divergent patterns and objects of worship are frequently noted as well, except for parts of the first and second centuries A.D. (see, for example, Mosiah 26:1-2; Alma 31; 14:18; 4 Nephi 1:41).

The highly ritualized and priest-led nature of Nephite society is also apparent (see, for example, Enos 1:22; Jarom 1:10-1; 4 Nephi 1:1-2). Especially interesting is the ceremonialism evident in Mosiah 19:20 and 24 and Alma 1:15, where the text mentions but does not explain the strange rites involved, no doubt because it was so obvious anciently that rites were essential. Furthermore, all major events in Nephite history were interpreted as the result of divine interventions (see, for example, Mosiah 5:7-8 and Alma 44:3-5).

According to the Book of Mormon, a variety of lesser sacred beings or powers and rites connected with them were recognized among the Nephites and Lamanites, although only hinted at by the orthodox record keepers. We read of "demons" (Helaman 13:37), "devils and unclean spirits" (1 Nephi 11:31), "the evil spirit" (Mosiah 4:14), "idol gods" (Mormon 4:14; see 4:21), and "sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics" (Mormon 1:19). Clearly the Nephite record gives us only glimpses of their ritual life and associated beliefs about the supernatural.

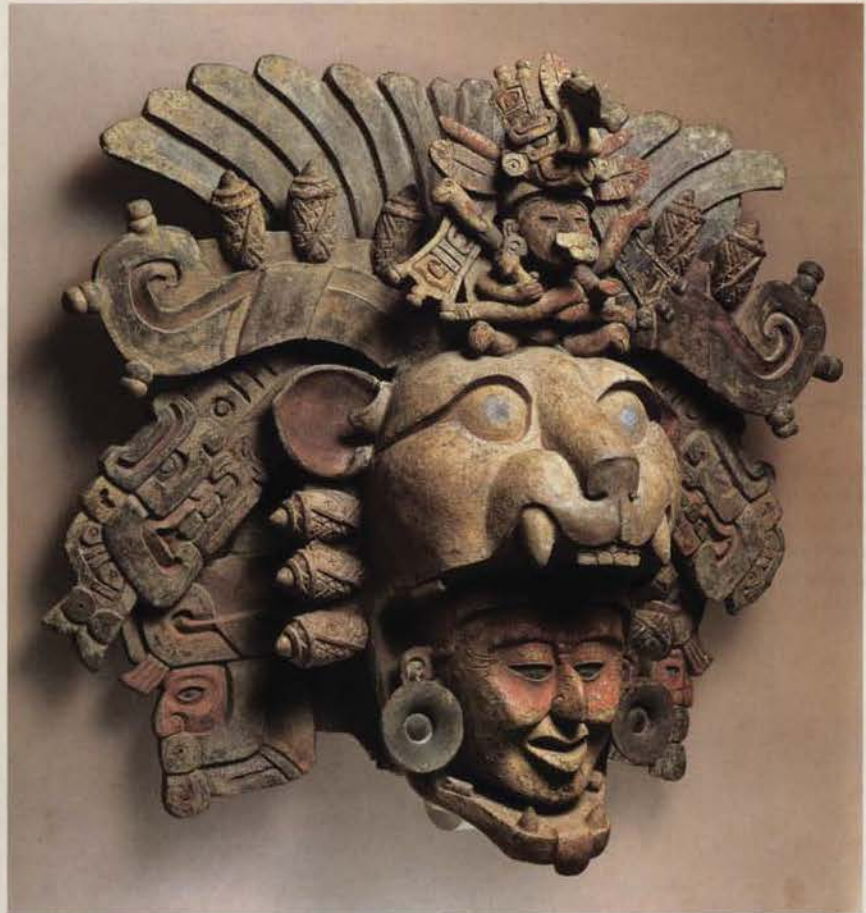


## THE NAWAL

A very old and basic belief, whose essentials were shared in parts of North America and East Asia, is labeled tonalism or nawalism. Some groups, particularly in northern Mesoamerica, emphasized this belief more than others. Its essential concept is related to shamanism. Each person was supposed to have a guardian spirit, usually an animal. This was one's *nawal* (the Aztecs' term). This spirit being gave support and protection, if one could get in touch with it on the right ritual terms and treated it right. Much of the fancy headdress ornamentation shown on human figures in Mesoamerica apparently depicts guardian *nawals*. Sometimes a *nawal* figure is even shown with its own *nawal* on top of it!



This bearded old man with his jaguar protector on his shoulder comes from Tamahu, Guatemala, during the time of the Nephites.



A superb example of a *nawal* representation is this Zapotec piece (about A.D. 600–900) showing a jaguar guardian. Animals other than the jaguar were also *nawals*.

## JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN MESOAMERICA?

Some early Spanish priests believed they were observing in native Mesoamerican rituals and beliefs evidence for the prior presence of Jews and of Christianity in the New World. Versions of the cross, baptism, circumcision, and other practices and symbols common in the ancient Near East or eastern Mediterranean were taken to argue for the arrival of the Ten Tribes or of some Christian missionary in Mexico many centuries ago. Other observers were more critical and doubted that any such influences reached America. The opposing views are summarized in Tozzer's

great edition of Bishop Diego de Landa's volume on Yucatan.<sup>104</sup>

Despite the naïveté of much of that early argument, the issue has never been fully resolved. A minority of writers in the last hundred years have mustered a good deal more evidence for a connection in culture and religion between the central Old World and Mesoamerica.<sup>105</sup> (See more information on this topic below.) Most experts do not accept any such connection, although the arguments in favor of people from the Mediterranean area arriving in Mesoamerica centuries ago are not trivial.<sup>106</sup>



A fowl, sometimes a quail but here a turkey, was a routine live offering (comparable to the use of a dove in Israelite rites), as shown in this scene of a priest represented in the Codex Nuttall at the time of the Spanish Conquest.

Many observers, beginning with the early Spanish priests, have been struck by similarities in concept between this type of "crucifixion," from the Codex Zouche-Nuttall, and that which Jesus Christ suffered.



## Sacrifices

Offerings were part of every ceremony. Incense (the offering was actually the sweet aroma) was burned at practically all rituals. The most common sacrifices were food, flowers, and clothing. Blood sacrifices were also typical; the animal most commonly offered was probably the quail, but deer and other large mammals were also dispatched at altars. Human blood, often spattered on paper, was another frequent offering.

In general concept and practice, and even in many details, the sacrifice complex of Mesoamerica recalls similar practices in the ancient Near East. A. V. Kidder, a famous Mesoamerican archaeologist, wrote about ancient Guatemalan cultures: "The belief that pungent smoke is sweet in the nostrils of the gods is one of the many extraordinary likenesses between Old and New World religions."<sup>107</sup> A sacrifice might be made by a priest on behalf of ruling officials or of the entire community, or the act might be more democratic, performed at the request of a common person for him- or herself or for family.

Just as some offerings were made to deities above the earth, symbolized by the ascending smoke of incense or of a burning object, others were made to supernaturals beneath the earth. For instance, caches

were put beneath the corner posts of temples or houses when built. The most spectacular examples involved ornaments of jade or other stones like those that excavators Drucker, Heizer, and Squier consider to be "deeply buried treasures" at Olmec La Venta.<sup>108</sup> The custom of burying offerings continued among successor peoples long after the Olmecs.



## VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Sacrifice was integral to the law of Moses, which the Book of Mormon puts at the center of Nephite religious life for the first six centuries (for instance, see Alma 30:3). A wide variety of animals and other materials were offered in myriad ways in that system of ritual practice, as in other Near Eastern cultures, and for virtually all of them we find parallels in Mesoamerica.<sup>109</sup>

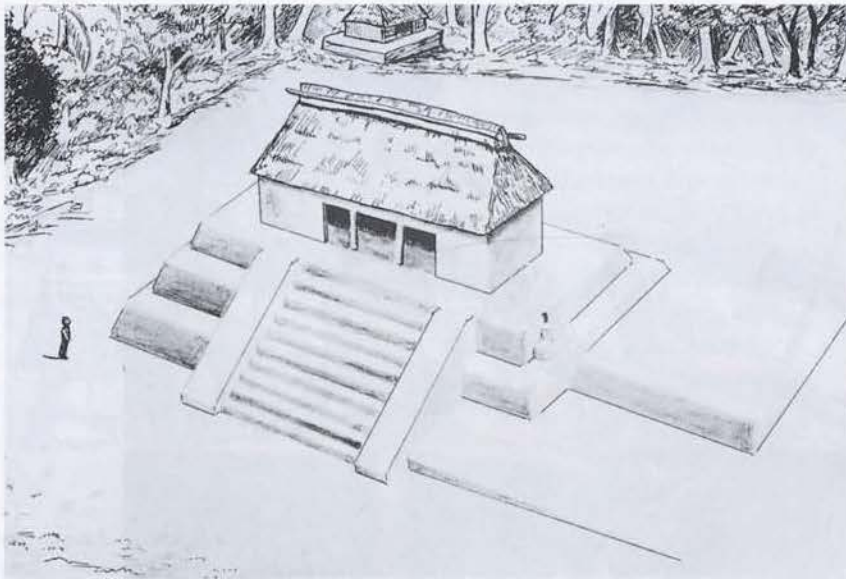
There is mention of "sacrifice(s)," alone or with "burnt offerings," at 1 Nephi 7:22, Mosiah 2:3, and 3 Nephi 9:19. Human sacrifice is alluded to twice, once in a hypothetical way (see Alma 34:10) and once in a barbaric, derivative form (see Mormon 4:14–5, 21). The possibility of sacrificing one's own blood is cited in Alma 34:11. And does the statement in Helaman 13:18–20 ("hide up their treasures" in the earth) recall the Mesoamerican pattern of caching beautiful and sacred objects?



The practice of animal sacrifice early turned to the sacrifice of humans, it appears. The custom was widespread in Mesoamerica and finally was carried on by the Aztecs "on a scale not even approached by any other ritual system in the history of the world."<sup>110</sup> Was this part of the "abominations" (1 Nephi 12:23) that Nephi prophesied would be present among his brothers' descendants after his own people had become extinct?



An artist's reconstruction shows the massive offering at La Venta (ca. 700 B.C.) of one thousand tons of carefully shaped green serpentinite stones imported from many miles away. It was deposited in a pit thirteen feet deep. Colored sands and clays—olive-blue, white, yellow, pink, and red—were selected and dumped on successive layers of stone. The design that appears when viewed from above is of a stylized jaguar face, a favorite emblem in Olmec belief for the god of the underworld and the night.

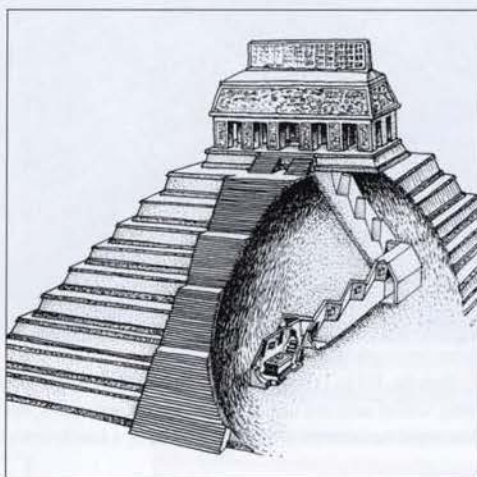


A typical village sacred center in the Late Pre-Classic period (the centuries immediately before and after the Christian era) looked like this small sacred platform and building at San Agustín, Chiapas, as drawn by an artist on the basis of excavation findings.

## Sacred Places

The pervasiveness of things sacred in the thought of the ancient Mesoamericans is evident in their thinking about the physical world. Geographical features were rarely, and perhaps never, merely objective parts of nature. In certain cultures every hill and dale was assigned sacred meaning. Some spots were thought of as more significant than others, such as caves, springs, lakes, and hills. Since sacred beings inhabited the multiple layers of heaven or the underworld, one's approach to those beings was favored at elevated or sunken spots. Caves and bodies of water were considered points of potential access to the underworld; hilltops were places to contact the upper levels of the cosmos. Those places were considered holy and somewhat dangerous

Burials were, of course, most appropriate at or near a sacred pyramid platform, the supposed connection point with the layered overworld and underworld. Here at Palenque's Temple of Inscriptions, the famous tomb discovered by Alberto Ruz was directly beneath the temple structure on top. Many people have commented on the conceptual parallel between this structure and Egyptian pyramids with their tombs.

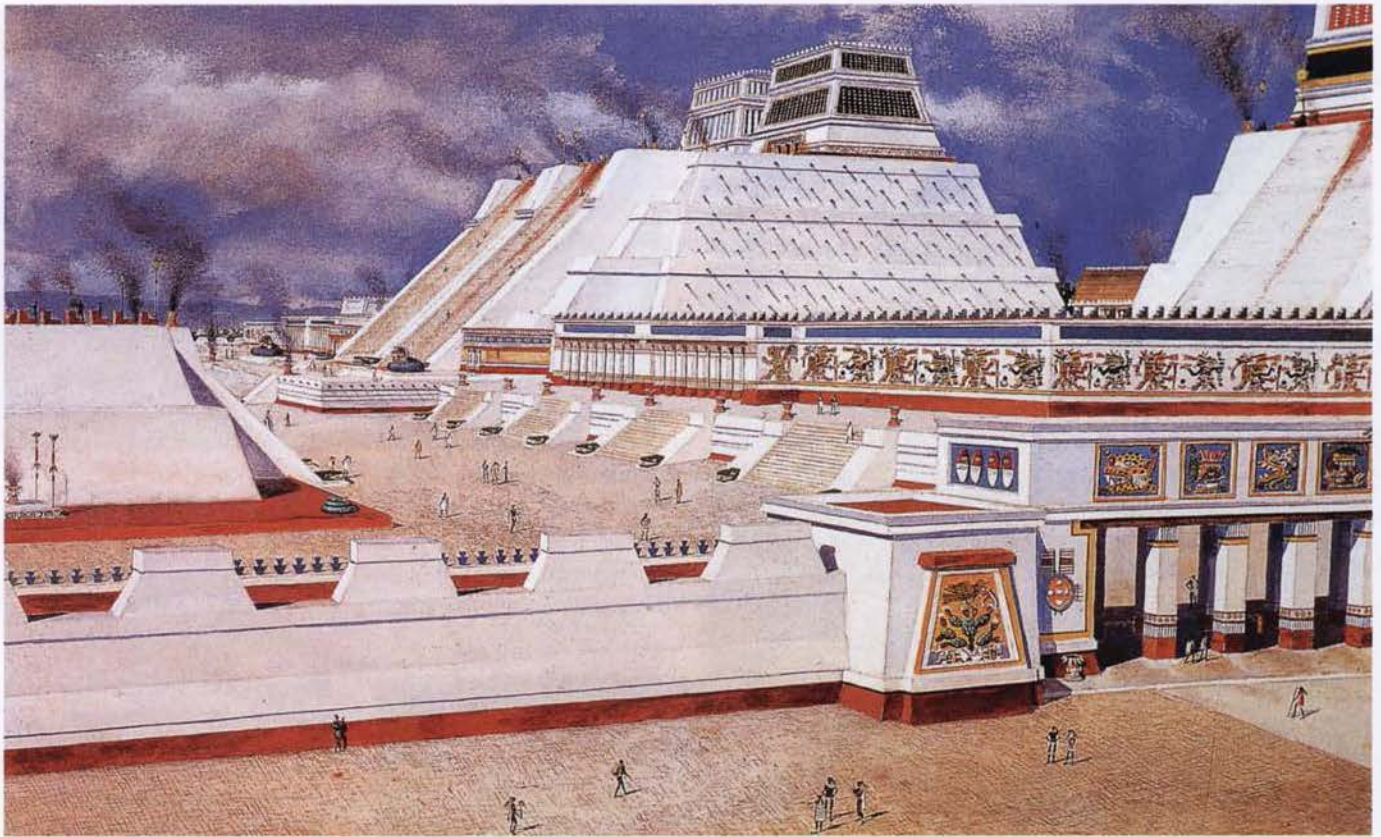


(see Jacob's reaction reported in Genesis 28:16–7). If no natural hill was convenient to a settlement, an artificial hill, or "pyramid," was erected to substitute.

No settlement had any standing if it lacked a sacred center. Shrines were scattered here or there—at the mouth of a cave or at a pond or a strange geological formation—places where unscheduled worship could be made, but a worship point of real social efficacy and prestige demanded the presence of an elevated temple structure within a community. The elevation was produced by piling up soil and rock to form a platform upon which a sacred house of god was constructed. In addition to a temple on such a hill that served the entire community, kin groups or sections of a settlement (wards) might erect structures for local use that had less prestige than the community's main edifices. When Cortez and his cohorts reached the city of Cholula on the way to the Aztec capital city, they climbed atop the huge central pyramid temple (the bulkiest construction in central Mexico) from where they counted some four hundred temple pyramids.<sup>111</sup> The scale and number of sacred structures a community could boast was probably an important measure of its prestige in the settlement hierarchy (rather like high-rise buildings in a modern city).

Not just the elevated structure, but a dedicated space around it constituted the temple. Only key priests entered the sacred house on top. For minor priests and public worshippers, the walled enclosure around the temple constituted the scene of their temple experience. The famous temples of Solomon and of Herod at Jerusalem were built in a similar way; only selected priests ever went into the holy building itself. To be "in the temple" (for example, as in Acts 2:46) usually meant to be in the extensive courtyard, where sacrifices and nearly all other activities were carried out. Likely when Benjamin, the Nephite king, called his people to "go up to the temple" (Mosiah 2:1; see 2:6) to hear him, their tents were pitched in the walled-in zone. A modern parallel is Temple Square in Salt Lake City.

In addition to the most formal temple complexes, various smaller holy places were recognized, as suggested above. On



The great central temple precinct of Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Aztecs, is seen in this artist's reconstruction. Note the wall that enclosed the entire holy zone.

certain scheduled days, a community ceremonial procession visited particular holy points within the settlement while bearing sacred emblems (nowadays it is the image of the local Catholic saint). In such a sequence of visits, music, dancing, prayers, and other oratorical formulas were presented and offerings were left at the holy spots. Offerings might also be left at mountaintop shrines or beside or in lakes, pools, and springs by individual worshippers. Some of the native peoples of Mexico and Central America still consider ancient ruins and standing monuments sacred and no doubt always have. Unscheduled offerings and prayers, particularly for favors like healing, are deemed appropriate at such places.

Today's shrines or altars within private homes or yards had parallels in pre-Columbian times, which often signified the spot of land where the extended family was thought to be planted or, in other words, the land of their inheritance.<sup>112</sup> Even fields were considered sacred places; prayers and sacrifices were made there upon initiating cultivation or in connection with the harvest.



The sense of a temple being an artificial mountain is clear in the looming presence of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan near Mexico City. The Spaniards called these structures "towers." The identical concept applied to the ziggurat or temple platform of ancient Mesopotamia, which was called a tower in the Book of Mormon.



**VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE**

Temples were central in various Nephite and Lamanite cities (see 2 Nephi 5:16; Mosiah 1:8; Alma 16:13; 26:29; Helaman 3:14). Sacrificial rites and instructional gatherings were carried on at the temple area (see Mosiah 2:1, 3, 5–7). Other sacred structures were called by terms translated “churches” and “synagogues” and were used for exhortation and instruction (see 4 Nephi 1:41; Alma 21:4).

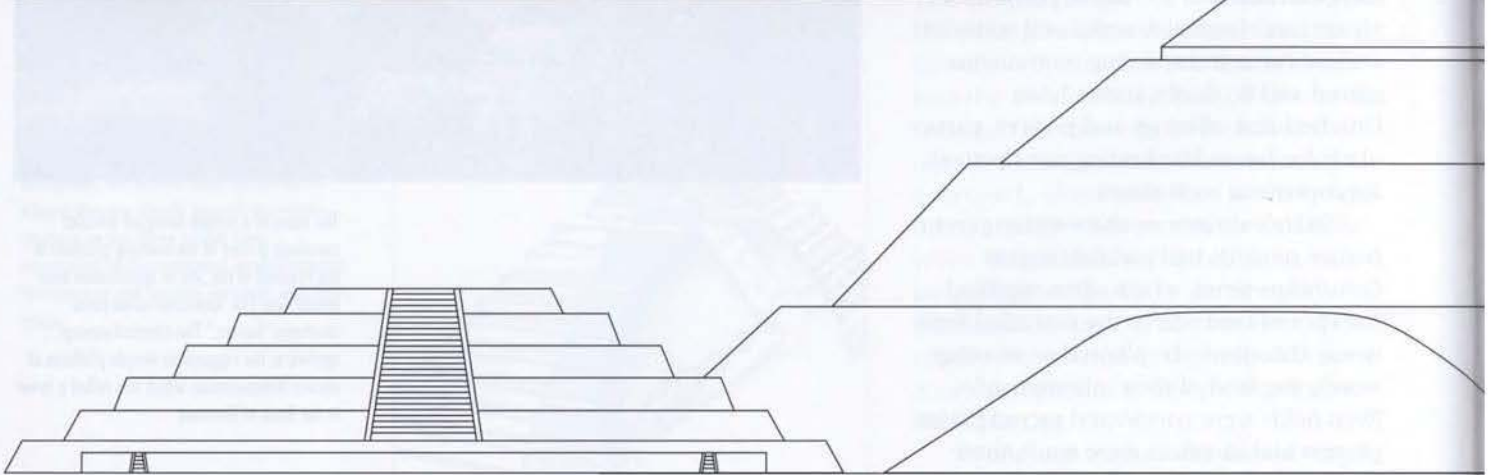
In the Nephite tradition, altars are mentioned in 1 Nephi 2:7 and Alma 15:17 and 17:4; presumably they were normally located at the temples (see Mosiah 2:1, 3). In addition to the political aspect of towers, mentioned above, they were also used as worship sites, as shown by Nephi<sub>2</sub>'s praying from the

top of his own tower (see Helaman 7:10). The equivalence of such structures to mountains is made clear; Nephi<sub>1</sub> and the brother of Jared ascended mountains to pray (see 1 Nephi 17:7; Alma 31:13; Ether 3:1; 4:1). Not surprisingly, bodies of water also had supernatural connotations, both positive and negative (see 1 Nephi 12:16; Mosiah 18:5–14, 30; Alma 7:15; 42:27). The “sanctuaries” mentioned in the text were distinct from temples and synagogues (see the distinction in Alma 23:2 and Helaman 3:14). They might have been shrines, such as mountaintops, caves, or pools, where a natural feature or special artifact marked a spot where devotion was considered appropriate.

Caves and cenotes (water holes) like this one at Dzitnup, Yucatan, were thought by the Maya and other peoples to give access to the underworld. The earth was supposed to rest on top of a giant aquatic creature which in turn floated on the primal underworld ocean. The notion of a great subterranean sea creature (or dragon) was shared with the Hebrews and in south Asia.

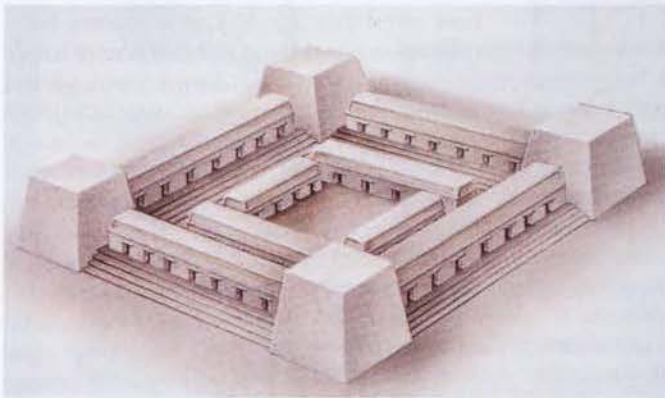


Altars (this one is at Teotihuacan) were themselves replicas of mountains, often terraced in imitation of the grand pyramid structures. The altar before the Temple of Solomon was similarly stepped, and it and the base of the temple at Jerusalem were conceived as artificial sacred mountains by the Jews.



Izapa Mound 60

Kaminaljuyu, Structure E-III-3



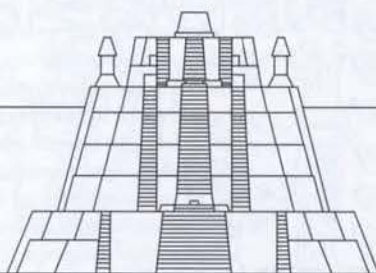
Archaeologists are uncertain about the function of many Mesoamerican structures. Even the designation temple is disputed by some experts in regard to particular forms of buildings. After all, we are left to infer a structure's function in most cases. What this strange building from Tikal was actually used for is unclear. Could it have served as a kind of synagogue?



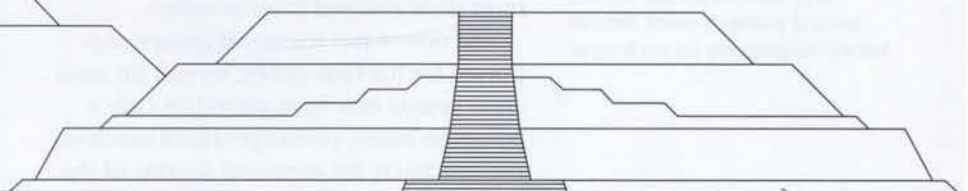
A shaman acting as a priest prays with a couple at a shrine at Zinacantan, Chiapas, for the wife's healing. Ancient shrines were probably scenes for similar rites of a personal nature. (What appear to be crosses are not Christian artifacts but are thought to represent doorways through which to reach ancestral spirits.)

Teotihuacan  
Pyramid of the Sun

Only in the last twenty years has it become clear that what is still called the Pre-Classic period, which extended to about A.D. 300, saw cultural developments as sophisticated as those in the so-called Classic period that followed. These sacred structures were built during the Nephite period of the Book of Mormon, mainly before the Classic period. (See also the structures at El Mirador on page 103, which are also from the early era.) All of the platform mounds had "house" structures on top, but only for Lamanai do we have the form preserved.



Lamanai, Structure 113



Cuicuilco



Priestly power was woven into the fabric of all Mesoamerican cultures. Here a sketch prepared for Father Sahagun's Florentine Codex shows two Aztec priests conducting a rite over a man.

## Priests, Prophets, and Shamans

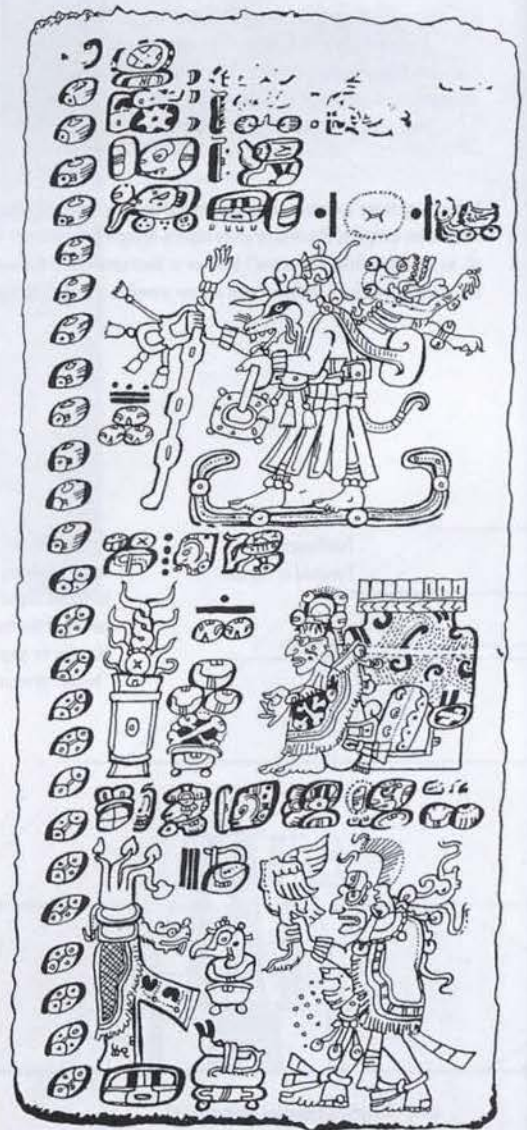
In the most advanced centers of the civilization there was an elaborate priesthood. At least three levels of authorities existed—the equivalent of high priest, supervisory priests, and regular priests. No doubt there were also novices still learning the ropes. The priesthood was formally under the dominance of the ruler; he designated whom he wished to fill the key roles, for he himself was a sacred figure who performed occasional core ritual duties. Priests were supported by offerings from the citizenry, particularly in the form of labor that went to cultivate lands held by the priestly body of a community or region. The religious men's prime duty was to see that the elaborate calendar of ceremonies was carried out. They made the sacrifices, prayed, fasted, and—although this is less clear—served as moral teachers and ethical conscience to the community or tribe. What schools there were were taught by priests, and a good deal of music and dancing may have operated under their direction, since most ritual involved those activities.

As one of the few social groups supported for full-time public service (in rural areas priests may have served on only a part-time basis), priests provided much of the continuity for advanced aspects of the culture. They were the custodians of records, probably the astronomers,

perhaps the engineers and artists, and so on across the board in the skills crucial to public life.

In areas of limited population a shaman sometimes carried out priestly duties too, but more often shamans were specialists in healing, divination, witchcraft (both "white" and "black"), and other sacred arts of significance mainly to individuals or families. While priests held public offices of a sort, shamans and their ilk had private "practices" like modern medical doctors, psychiatrists, or fortune-tellers.

Prophets are also described in some of the native traditional sources. It is unclear how often they served also as priests, but they were considered to have power to see and announce the future, although their prophecies usually were issued in obscure, metaphoric terms.







One form of prophecy of great importance at the time of the Spaniards' arrival was astrology—divining the future of individuals and society from the calendar. The moment of one's birth in relation to lucky or unlucky days and cycles was taken very seriously. The resulting sense of fatalism tended to paralyze at least the Aztecs from challenging their supposed fate. Other peoples held similar ideas, though perhaps not to the Aztec extreme. This is a section of astrological prophecy from the Mayan Dresden Codex.

Diviners (who might or might not have been shamans) were specialists in various modes of telling the future by reading omens—observing the movements of birds, for example. In this scene in the Codex Borbonicus, the original ancestors, gods in the Aztec pantheon, who lived in the highest, or thirteenth, heaven, are divining by tossing kernels of corn and interpreting how they land.



## VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Among the early Nephites, “there were exceedingly many prophets. . . . And there was nothing save it was exceeding harshness, preaching and prophesying . . . and continually reminding” the people of potential doom that could keep them on track ritually and morally (Enos 1:22–3). Those “prophets, and the priests, and the teachers, did labor diligently, . . . teaching the law of Moses” (Jarom 1:11). By the first century A.D., after the appearance of Jesus Christ among them, “they did not walk any more after the performances and ordinances of the law of Moses; but they did walk after the commandments . . . from their Lord” (4 Nephi 1:12). At that time the whole people were led in a theocracy by “the disciples of Jesus” (4 Nephi 1:13). Two centuries later there had arisen “many priests and false prophets” (4 Nephi 1:34). Thus the social role of holy men was central in Nephite life throughout their history.

Among the duties of the Nephite religious teachers was participation in the legal (see, for example, Mosiah 26:6–12) and military systems (see 3 Nephi 3:19), divination (see Alma 16:5–8), moral critique (see Alma 5), the keeping of sacred paraphernalia and maintenance of the key records (see Alma 37:2; 3 Nephi 1:2; Mormon 1:2–3), and chronological and astronomical reckoning (see 3 Nephi 8:1–2).

The Nephite priesthood was structured in at least three levels and involved some specialization in functions (keeping the calendar was one specialty, judging by 3 Nephi 8:1–2).

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Shamans were socially marginal, both esteemed and somewhat feared because of their strange powers. They also had powers of showmanship, including a repertoire of magic tricks to impress their clients. A mask was sometimes part of their paraphernalia. (From Tlatilco, before 500 B.C.)

## MAYA PROPHECIES OF THE COMING OF THE CHRISTIANS

Several Maya prophecies about the coming of the Christians were reported to the Spanish priests after the Conquest. One was spoken by Ah Cambal, who held the office of Chilam among the Tutul Xiu group of Yucatan Mayas. Some years before they were conquered he “announced to them publicly that they would soon be subjected by a foreign race, and that they would preach to them one God and the power of a tree, which . . . means ‘a tree erected with great virtue against the evil spirit.’” The Spaniards considered this tree to be the cross.

Another prophecy from the same place was uttered by famed Chilam Balam, “whom they considered a great prophet and soothsayer.” He told them that “within a short time a white and bearded race would come from where the sun rises and they would bear on high a sign like this + which their gods could not approach and before which they would flee, and that this people would rule the land and would do no harm to those who would receive them peacefully. . . . And afterwards when the Spaniards came and they knew that they brought the symbol of the holy cross which was like that which their prophet Chilam Balam had drawn, they believed what he had told them to be true.”

*Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatan*



## STRANGE BODY STATES

**B**its of information from early Spanish sources fit together with modern investigation to shed light on the use of hallucinogenic and other psychoactive drugs in an area of human experience that overlaps with religion. Certain shamans in central Mexico a generation ago were still ritually consuming intoxicating mushrooms that produced visions. Other substances were also ingested for similar effects and probably have been for thousands of years.<sup>114</sup> Some features of this mushroom cult may connect to the Old World, particularly with Siberia. But tobacco was used in ritual on a wider scale than hallucinogens; it too was considered to evoke a connection with the divine powers. Generally it was priests or shamans who used these substances. There is no evidence of nonsacred usage, for pleasure.

Fasting had the power to produce somewhat similar effects. Again it was mostly priests who fasted, in a sense on behalf of their community congregation. They sometimes fasted for as long as a year, their deprivation consisting of eating only one meal per day with no spices or salt, as well as not bathing. For example, Sahagun's informants referred to those "who had fasted twenty days and those who had fasted a whole year" as having a vital role in ensuring the success of a ritual.<sup>115</sup>



### VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

**V**isions were considered legitimate spiritual phenomena among orthodox Nephite religious leaders. Not all accepted their reality or significance (see Alma 30:28). There is no hint in the Book of Mormon of chemically induced visionary experiences among the peoples it describes, although perhaps those things might be included among the reported "sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics" of the third century A.D. (Mormon 1:19; compare 2:10). Fasting was practiced among the devout, especially the priests (see Mosiah 27:22–3; Alma 17:9).

Nobody knows for sure what is signified by the interesting ceramic figures from the Gulf Coast of central Veracruz that are called smiling faces. One suggestion is that they depict those who have consumed drugs or alcohol for a ritual purpose—perhaps in preparation for being sacrificed.



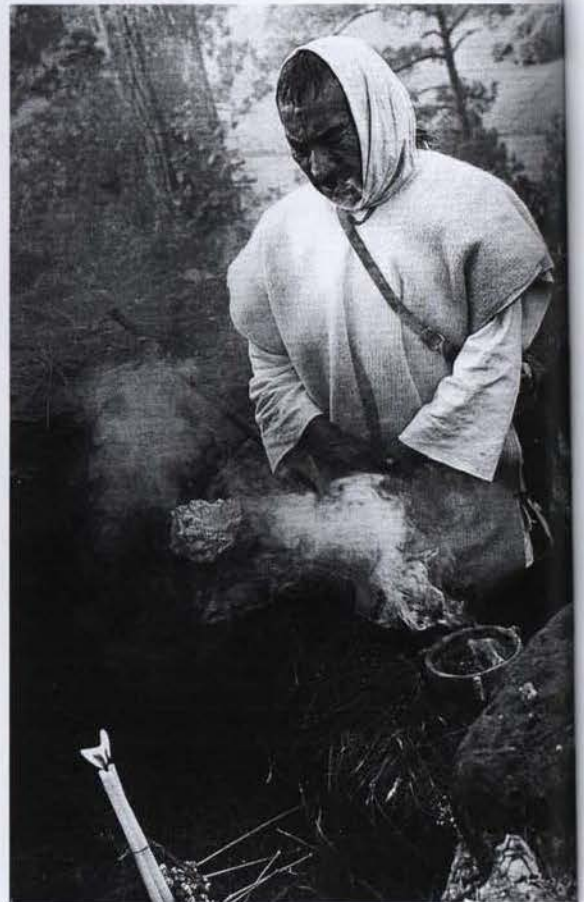
Priests consumed tobacco in the form of cigars, clay pipes (rarely), or cigarettes (in segments of cane) in connection with certain rites. This inscribed shell from Mexico or Guatemala of about A.D. 600 to 800 shows such usage. Other groups throughout Mesoamerica grew and used the plant as well.

## Personal Worship

Amid the abundant communal rites that so characterized religious life in Mesoamerica, we occasionally detect the struggling of individuals to find meaning for their personal lives. The writings of the Mexica (Aztecs), which have been preserved for us in records written in European script after the Conquest and now translated to European tongues, reveal some of the probing that went on. At places in the Spanish records also, comments and excerpts of native thought are encountered that show the desire of individuals to penetrate beyond the everyday. Some ancient artists captured scenes of this struggle for personal spirituality. Some of these representations may dismay us because their struggles took cultural forms that are different than what our European tradition categorizes as spiritual, yet nobody seeing the intensity they exhibit can question the profound desire of the supplicants for enlightenment or relief.



From about A.D. 600 in Veracruz comes this powerful image of a worshipper who obviously feels deeply a personal relation with the supernatural.





### VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Careful study of the Book of Mormon shows that, while individual spiritual quests are documented among both Nephites and Lamanites, relatively little is said of that aspect of religion compared with the emphasis on formal, community worship. Enos's "wrestle . . . before God" (Enos 1:2) is an example. The remarkable conversion of the king of the Lamanites, Lamoni's father (see Alma 22), and of a "Lamanitish" woman and her father are other cases (Alma 19:16-7). At the end of Nephite history the lonely persistence of Mormon and Moroni<sup>2</sup> in their personal religious convictions stands out (see Mormon 1:2-3, 15-7; Moroni 9:3-6, 20-2). But the small proportion of the individual seekers, as perhaps is the case in most ages, is epitomized in Jarom 1:3-4; there we are

told that most of the early Nephite populace were hard of heart, deaf of ear, and blind of mind—yet not all, for some had frequent "communion with the Holy Spirit" (Jarom 1:4). They would have been the type of individual to whom "Helaman and his brethren . . . did declare the word of God . . . unto the convincing of many people of their wickedness, which did cause them to repent" (Alma 62:45). Much more often, however, the behavior documented in the Nephite record emphasizes the group dimension: "And the people of Nephi began to prosper again. . . . But notwithstanding their riches . . . they were not lifted up in the pride of their eyes; neither were they slow to remember the Lord their God" (Alma 62:48-9).

The minority Mesoamerican tradition of seeking reconciliation with the world beyond continues among modern natives. Here a man from highland Chiapas exerts himself in rapt struggle.

### A REMARKABLE INDIAN INDIVIDUAL



In 1622 two missionaries, a Catholic priest and a lay brother, were put ashore on the coast of Honduras accompanied by four Indian interpreters. No Spanish political, military, or ecclesiastical force had succeeded in penetrating the area by then, a century after Cortez's conquest of Aztec Mexico far to the north. On the morning of their third day they were approached by a band of people wearing mainly feather and flower ornaments. They accompanied a venerable old man with long, white hair.

He greeted them with a profound bow and asked what had taken them so long to arrive. Puzzled, they asked why he had expected them. He explained that "being one day at work in his plantation, there appeared to him a white child, more beautiful than any thing he had ever before seen or could imagine; it looked at him with great tenderness, and said, 'Know that you will not die before you become a Christian; there will come here some white men, with robes of the color of this ground, reaching to their feet; when they arrive, receive them kindly . . . for they are ministers of God, who has granted thee this signal mark of his mercy, because thou hast done well, and hast supported those who wanted assistance!" They then learned that the old gentleman, "*even in his idolatry*, had employed himself in acts of kindness; he cultivated maize to distribute among those who were in distress; he composed strifes, and settled all disputes among his neighbors." (Emphasis in original.)

The missionaries began to instruct their new friends. They baptized the old man, who died shortly afterward, and all his family. Many others of the Indians also received Catholic baptism "from the great respect they bore towards the old man."



A ceramic model from west Mexico displays one form of funeral procession. The death of a person prominent in the community involved the extended kin group with other groups, as relations were reinforced or revised in the aftermath. So the funeral was sometimes an important social event involving multiday feasting and drinking and the exchange of gifts.

## Burial and Afterlife

Deceased members of society continued to influence their descendants. Death removed them to another sphere, but they were still considered to be accessible by means of memory and ritual. They were loved, respected, or feared according to cultural forms peculiar to each local group, although these all fit into a broad pattern of beliefs and practices found throughout Mesoamerica.

Important differences surrounded death depending upon the social standing of the deceased. A person of high rank was honored and praised, while the death of one of little social consequence was treated more casually. The belief was general that most of the dead underwent a lengthy journey after death, past assorted perils. A dog was their guide; an actual dog might be slain to be the companion, but the little wheeled toy dogs and other canine effigies of baked clay that have been found in burials could have served as inanimate substitutes. (At times objects thought to be useful on the journey or in the next life were also placed with a corpse.)

Some adults were given a respectful burial in the earth in a grave or tomb. Tombs could be very elaborate in construction and decoration. In a few cultures the dead were cremated. Many tombs apparently were reused, probably to bury kin, as was the case in Old World civilizations. Archaeologists fail to find nearly enough human remains to account for much of a proportion of the ancient dead. This could be due to the practice of

cremation but is more likely because the dead were buried at some distance from the community.

The subject of the afterlife in Mesoamerican beliefs has been handled confusedly by scholars. A common interpretation, heavily based on the Aztec material, has it that all who died set out on the road to the underworld mentioned above. Some classes of the dead (for the Aztecs, warriors slain in battle and mothers who died in childbirth) were at length transported to a pleasant realm. The mass of the dead, however, remained in an underworld limbo until they decayed away. A favored few rose to glory in the east out of the underworld on the model of the rising sun, moon, and stars. (On major and certain minor points this scheme was very similar to Egyptian beliefs about death.) Other scholars have interpreted the fragmentary literature on Mesoamerican beliefs as showing a more widespread anticipation of a resurrection whose quality was to be based on the individual's moral state.<sup>116</sup>

Ancestry was an important social dimension in all Mesoamerican cultures (see page 66). At least for the higher social classes, genealogies were kept and social relationships were claimed and cemented on the basis of the prestige of one's ancestors. Most of those connections were probably documented only orally, however. Respect for and commemoration of the ancestors as an element of religious practice was correspondingly varied. For common people, ritual observances in honor of and deference to the departed ancestors were far less significant than for nobility.

Masks were sometimes used to remember an ancestor. This striking wooden mask was preserved amazingly well—including part of the original paint—in a tomb whose location in the Maya lowlands is unknown.





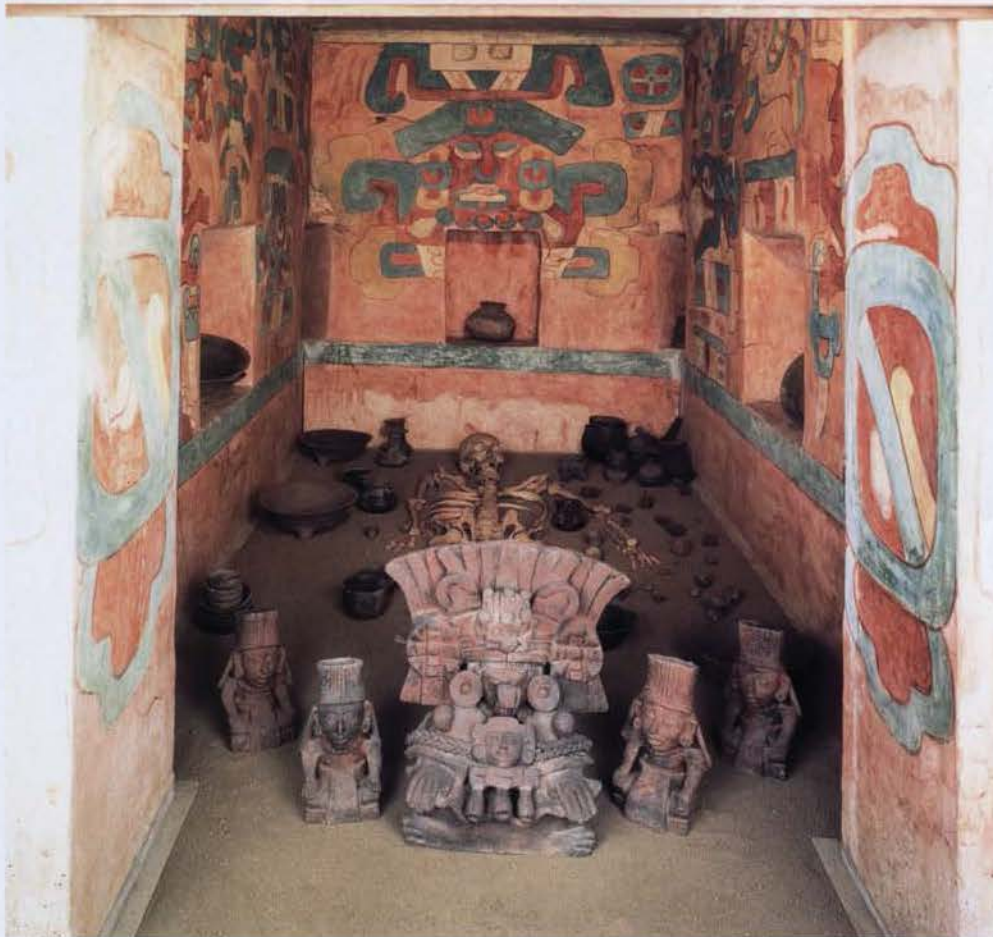
### VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

**B**ook of Mormon peoples were much concerned with their ancestors and with the disposition of the dead. In the Nephite record, the deceased were thought to go to the underworld, apparently the dim, eventless place known to their Israelite forebears as *sheol*. Nephi<sub>1</sub> believed an "awful monster," symbolic of the "devil," death, and "hell," held a person in his "grasp,"<sup>117</sup> Those who believed in the Holy One of Israel were delivered via resurrection from the monster into the heavens to enjoy a blessed state. This salvation was symbolized by reaching the tree of life and eating its fruit (see 2 Nephi 9, especially verses 9–10, 13, 19; and Alma 5:34, 62).

Burial was the typical mode of disposal of corpses for both Nephites and Lamanites (see 2 Nephi 4:12; Mosiah 9:19; Alma 3:1; 30:1; 57:28; Helaman 9:10; Alma 53:3). In exceptional circumstances corpses were thrown in the sea, a "watery grave" (1 Nephi 18:18; see Alma 3:3; 44:21–2). To be left unburied on land was a bad fate (see Alma

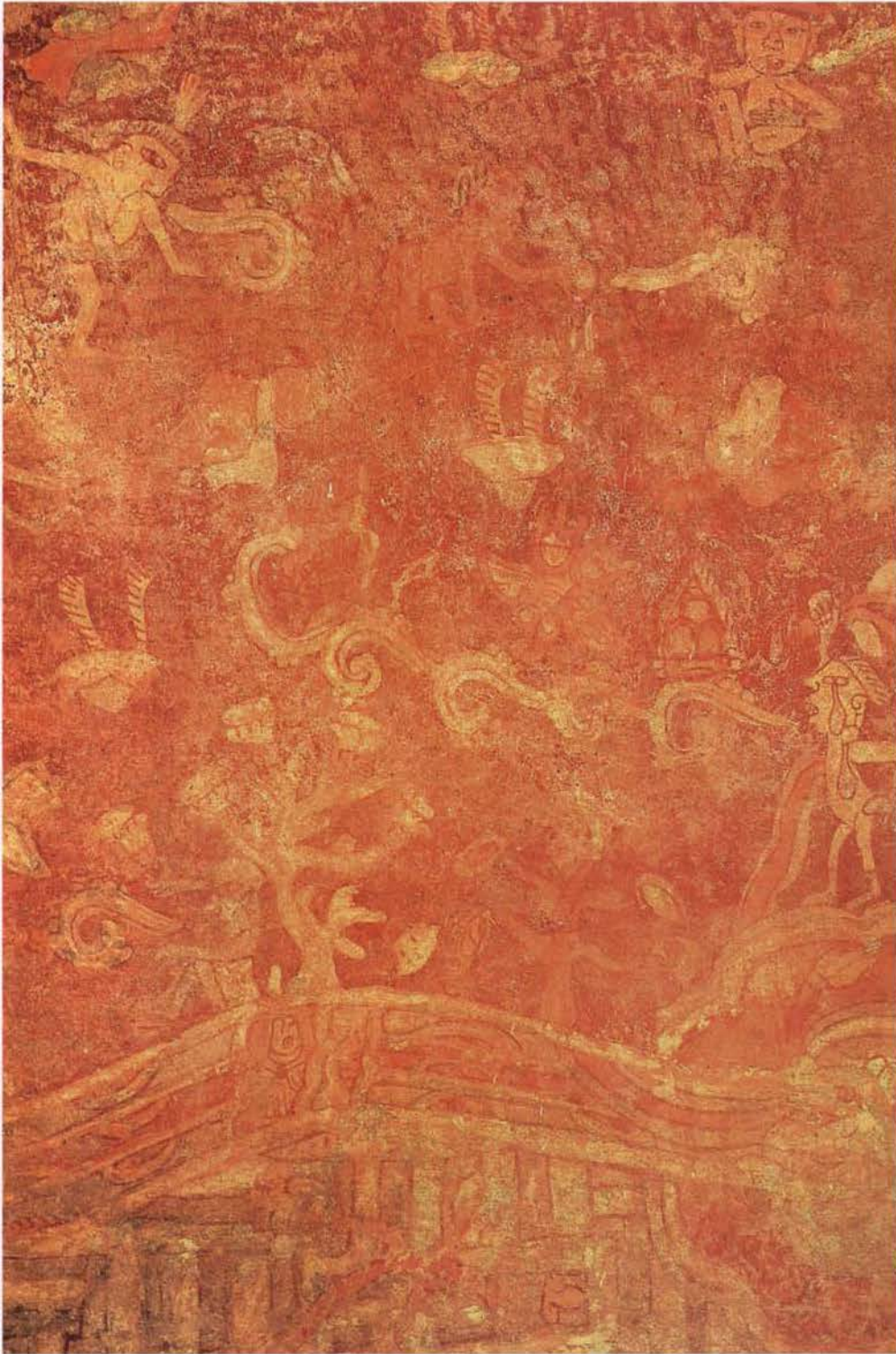
2:37–8; 16:10–1). A pattern is suggested by the burial of a Lamanite king, who was to be put in a tomb ("sepulchre," Alma 19:1) that had already been prepared to receive him. Mourning for the dead was characterized by extreme weeping, wailing, prayer, fasting, and possibly self-sacrifice of blood, following a pattern received from the land of Judah (see 1 Nephi 16:35; Mosiah 28:18; Alma 30:2; Helaman 9:10, 22; on the blood, compare Alma 34:11 with Deuteronomy 14:1 and Jeremiah 16:6). How much of this customary pattern applied to the disposal of deceased commoners we cannot tell.

The traditions, desires, or memory of the "fathers" were active considerations in dealing with current issues (for example, Mosiah 1:5–7, 13–6; Alma 9:10; 20:18; Helaman 15:11, 15).<sup>118</sup> Written and oral genealogies were kept (see 1 Nephi 5:14; Jarom 1:1; Omni 1:18; Alma 37:3), going all the way back to the patriarchal founders of Israel (see, for example, Alma 10:2–3).



For the prominent and wealthy, or perhaps for the priestly, burial might be in a sumptuously decorated tomb like this reconstructed one of the Classic period in Oaxaca.





From this mural at Teotihuacan dating to around A.D. 400–500 we see a portion of *Tlalocan*, the delightful paradise still known to the Aztecs a millennium later. It featured abundant water, vegetation, food, and pleasures that qualified persons could attain.



This is one art form that was used to represent an ancestor. From Pacific coastal Guatemala, it was carved within the last few centuries B.C., when the Lamanite people seem to have been inhabiting that zone.



Stela 50 from Izapa, Chiapas, is interpreted by Norman as symbolically showing resurrection of the skeleton through picturing the umbilical cord.